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# Smart People, Stupid Networks: The Internet's Equalizing Influence on Political Discourse and Engagement

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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

Smart People, Stupid Networks:  
The Internet's Equalizing Influence on Political Discourse and  
Engagement

An Honors Thesis Presented By Joseph Backer

To the Department of Government in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for Honors in the Major Field

Connecticut College  
New London, Connecticut  
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## *Abstract*

This study explores the impact and influences of the Internet on formalized political discourse and engagement during the last decade. It traces the traditions and conventions of predominantly top-down and elite-dominated methods of information dissemination and citizen mobilization, beginning with newspapers at the turn of the nineteenth century and progressing to the professionalization and specialization experienced during the twentieth century. These sustained patterns of limited influence for non-elites had a marginalizing effect on participation and understandings of democratic responsiveness.

Since the emergence of the Internet as a widespread medium of communication, however, prevailing hierarchies of control over discourse and engagement have been challenged on a number of fronts. This study highlights many such challenges and argues that the Internet is an equalizing force that is counteracting the disproportionate levels of power held by political elites. It further underlines the complementary nature of the Internet to traditional forms of political expression, and the necessity of policies that will equip Americans with the confidence and experience necessary to realize the Internet's potential as a political forum.

To my grandfather, Labon Backer, who has lived more  
American history than anyone else I know, and always  
inspired me to stay engaged and be heard.

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## *Introduction*

### Watch This Space

On the morning of March 29<sup>th</sup>, reports began to trickle out of Zimbabwe that the opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), was claiming a substantial victory over the ruling Zanu-PF party in the joint presidential and parliamentary elections that were taking place. The president, Robert Mugabe, has been in power since 1980 and by most accounts has been the driving force behind calamitous economic decline, while simultaneously using state power to repress political opposition and violate the human and civil rights of Zimbabweans across the country. Previous elections during the last decade had done little to weaken his grip on the presidency.

I called my friend Andrew, who is from the capital city of Harare and currently studying at Yale, in the hopes of procuring some insider information. He told me that his own sense of what might be happening in Zimbabwe was a mixture of feeling like he had been here before but also that this was the best opportunity in a long time for serious change. But he couldn't give me much more than *The New York Times* had, in terms of specifics. "I know as much as you do," he explained. Tight control of media and information within Zimbabwe meant that those of us reading articles in the United States might actually be learning the news before many within the country did.

I wasn't the first person to ask him about the situation, though, and he had already begun to compile informative and helpful news stories he was finding online, using the "Mini-Feed" on his Facebook account to post articles, blogs and pictures for his friends to read. Each link had a short comment below it, written by Andrew as an interpretation of, or reaction to, what he had gathered. The second item, a story from Bloomberg.com,



was accompanied by this:

Updates: the MDC is claiming huge wins (67%!), but the long haul is just beginning, and the government is refusing to release results yet. Watch this space.

In the weeks since Election Day, as the storylines of the Zimbabwean political turmoil have indeed grown increasingly muddled and frustrating, Andrew's personalized news feed has been a daily source of news, collected from an international range of organizations: *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, the Associated Press and Reuters, and a whole host of African publications from Zimbabwe, South Africa and beyond. On my own – and even with the processing power of the Internet – collecting and filtering through the thousands of news stories available each day about Zimbabwe would have been a daunting task. Instead, I've been able to read the news over the shoulder of a trusted source and someone who knows where to look – with the added bonus of getting to hear his personal (albeit short) take on the information at hand.

Andrew's experience is a microcosm of the dramatic effect of the Internet on political discourse and engagement. The last two centuries in the United States have seen incredible, unbridled change in all aspects of life, but there have been remarkably few shifts in the way Americans learn and interact as political citizens. Through newspapers, radio and television, we are given the news that editors choose to include, with few opportunities for feedback or interaction with the source. Formalized political discourse, then, has always been predominantly top-down and one-way. The motto of the national standard-bearer for modern journalism, *The New York Times*, is "All the News That's Fit to Print" – an appropriate summation of the centralized and elite-dominated control over the scope of discussion and debate. "All the News That Fits to Print" would be just as accurate an encapsulation of the simple calculus of print and broadcast journalism: the

typical daily newspaper only contains 10% of the available news from that day – and that represents ten times the information reported on a typical half-hour television news program (Smith 1980, 17 & 259). It's a limitation that has had important implications for political culture in the United States.

The Internet, on the other hand, is a massive and two-way network (though the term “two-way” does it very little justice): a vast public square for the essentially unlimited publication and discussion of information. The emergence of such a platform has had an incredible effect on the traditional news media in the United States and their relationship with the nation. During his appearance on *The Colbert Report* on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, New York University professor and new media expert Clay Shirky summed it up:

Prior to the Internet, if you had something to say in public, you couldn't. Period. Media was what you didn't have access to. And what the nation has access to [now], is media... through their own platforms.<sup>1</sup>

Twenty years ago, it was prohibitively difficult for the average American to publicize his or her opinions about current events and issues, especially on a recurring basis, to any audience not within earshot. Today, my friend Andrew has transformed his Facebook profile into an international news bureau and opened the door to direct discourse with anyone in his social network (292 Facebook friends, as of April 17th). The same phenomenon is happening all over the Internet, in blogs, wikis and via email. The vertical hierarchies of control are being reduced, and power over the national conversation is diffusing out from the center.

Even more impressively, the changes to political discourse are extending to political engagement, as the Internet facilitates easier and more powerful channels of

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<sup>1</sup> Comedy Central, “Interview – Clay Shirky | The Colbert Report | Comedy Central,” Comedy Central website, 5:40, <http://www.comedycentral.com/colbertreport/videos.jhtml?videoId=164882> (accessed April 19, 2008).

involvement for non-elite Americans. Within election and interest group campaigning, the same developments are occurring: citizens on the ground level are using new tools to become important members of the campaigns, and the leadership of those efforts are relying more and more on the ability of non-elites to act as trusted sources within the social networks they have built around themselves. Just as Andrew's friends have turned to his news feed as a reliable source of information from around the world, engaged individuals across the United States are accumulating influence as political organizers that was barely imaginable as recently as the 1990s.

At the heart of these shifts is the “stupid network.” Originally coined by David Isenberg in 1997, the term describes a network based on decentralized functionality so that, in an uncertain environment, decisions do not have to always be made by those at the core (Wolf 2004). The network is only stupid in the sense that it requires very few assumptions or standards to be applied to its participants; as a result, “[u]sers gain end-to-end control of interactions, which liberates large amounts of innovative energy” (Isenberg 1998). It is a concept brought to life again and again in the online techniques employed by political organizations and individuals, from blogs to political campaigns. The unfolding of the 2008 presidential campaign has served as an exciting validation of that concept. Those who trusted the stupid network and tapped into it effectively have been able to defy many conventions of the campaign trail and reap the benefits of an energized citizenry.

The chapters that follow constitute my undertaking to explore the historical legacies of formalized political discourse and engagement in the United States, and the online developments challenging them – to chart the significant milestones in a

progression that has been playing out since the birth of the country. For many observers, there is a sense that we have been here before, and that the potential of the Internet as a medium of communication is not much greater than other technologies to have emerged: the printing press, the telegraph, the radio or the television. It is my belief that we have, in this moment, an unprecedented opportunity to change the nature of American politics, empower ourselves and strengthen the democratic framework of the United States.

### **Methods and Resources**

My own interest in the interactions of a healthy democracy extends back to high school, when I was first introduced to the thrills and difficulties of both discourse and engagement. As a member of my school's Model United Nations club, I was drawn into the back-and-forth of our debates and the frantic negotiation of resolution-building. I think it was during those sessions, as I was representing an agenda that did not necessarily match my own opinions and moving quickly from one issue to another, when I first began to recognize that discourse is the true foundation of democracy. Standing behind each individual debate is an endorsement of the ideal that true progress is born out of reasoned and informed discussion.

My academic exploration of the questions I have set out to examine in this thesis research began in my sophomore year here, in an introductory-level course on the American political system. Many of the readings from that semester, and most notably Thomas Patterson's *The Vanishing Voter*, had a formative influence on my evolving interests. My admittance into the Holleran Center's Certificate Program for Community Action and Public Policy was a process that year which pushed me to focus my studies

and commit to the idea of a senior project that would bookend my college experience.

Interning with Deval Patrick's gubernatorial campaign in the summer of 2006 stands out as the most important step out of the many that have brought me to this point. One of several defining characteristics of that campaign was its innovative use of the Internet to fuel a state-wide, grassroots movement. Working in the New Media department, I had direct contact with the day-to-day management of these online tools – a constantly fascinating and dynamic experience. My time with the campaign was central in providing me with the knowledge and the motivation to undertake an in-depth study of where American politics might be headed in the online era, in order to build on my firsthand experiences and tie together everything I had done.

I drew from a number of different sources in conducting my research over the course of the last year. These included in-depth studies and surveys reflecting national habits and opinions regarding Internet usage, as well as primary sources such as the Google News and Wikipedia websites, and the report issued by MoveOn.org to its members following its 2006 midterm elections mobilization efforts. I also drew on numerous newspaper and magazine articles, which provide topical coverage of important landmarks in the evolution of the Internet as a political forum. Academic articles and books helped provide the scholarly analysis necessary to evaluate both the legacy of other communications media and the growing influence of the Internet. From this framework, I set out to demonstrate that the Internet is having two important effects on American politics. The first is as an equalizing force: the fundamental structure of the Internet is such that traditional hierarchies of control can be challenged and counteracted by political non-elites. The second effect has been to draw new participants into political processes

and give them decision-making power that has previously been reserved for elite individuals.

### **Overview**

The first section of the study traces the evolution of discourse and engagement in the United States over the span of two centuries. Chapter 1 examines the legacy of the top-down and one-way distribution of news and political power that emerged in an infant United States, originating with post-colonial newspapers. These newspapers laid the foundations of the American political parties and an elite-dominated environment of discourse, and gave way to similar hierarchies of control during the nineteenth century. Chapter 2 brings the narrative into the twentieth century and discusses the specialization and professionalization of politics and the news industry during that time, and the subsequent marginalization of non-elites.

The second section focuses on the Internet as an equalizing force on the unbalanced distribution of power in American political discourse and engagement. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the growth of the Internet within the last decade and a half, as well as an exploration of the factors encouraging and impeding the spread of Internet access – and broadband technologies in particular. Chapter 4 discusses the effects of the Internet on the dissemination of news and information, and the broader changes to the flow and hierarchy of political discourse that have occurred. Chapter 5 examines the evolving tactics and philosophies of political engagement within the spheres of political campaigns and interest group organizations. The conclusion draws lessons from the implications of the research and emphasizes the complementary role of

the Internet in American politics.

The lifespan of the Internet represents a blink of the eye in the total history of human communication. It cannot be accurately understood without first considering the environment for American discourse that preceded it – an environment similarly molded by the conditions that came before it. As such, a discussion of today's political conditions must begin with an exploration of the post-colonial circumstances that laid the foundation for the modes of interaction that have persisted to this day.

## *Chapter One*

### The Top-Down Legacy of Political Discourse

No nation is born with a vibrant and fully-developed democracy already established in its villages or in the traditions of its citizens. It is a political culture that must be nurtured into existence and guided through every generation. The evolution of political discourse and engagement in the United States, following its inception at the close of the Revolutionary War, has shown just how varied and uncertain that progress can be. The central elements of democratic life in this country, with political campaigning and the press among the most prominent, have undergone significant transformation in the nearly two-and-a-quarter centuries of their existences. But it is only until relatively recently that the underlying philosophy of democracy underwent any serious alterations. Before then, control over the choices given voters and the information that informed their votes was remarkably concentrated in the hands of an elite class of Americans.

In the beginning, these men were almost always engaged in some way with the printing profession, a position of unique ability and power to tap into a growing national network of information exchange and a discipline treated as essential to the cohesiveness and success of the new federal government. The American editor, therefore, was entrusted from the outset with a responsibility as the steward of discourse for his community and his country; this was the result of a conscious decision by politicians as well as the simple fact that the limitations of the day made the newspaperman the only viable choice. It was a role that would remain essentially unchanged through many distinct periods. Over the course of more than two centuries, the format, philosophy and



consequence of newspapers have undergone huge changes – with each phase as varied and uneven as the last. The underpinning, however, has remained constant: regardless of its length, breadth, distribution or political slant, every newspaper is a carefully and deliberately crafted product. It is the creation of its editors, who by necessity must make precise decisions about its content. As a result, the newspaper – whether its articles are written with objectivity in mind or blatantly partisan – has always retained a top-down thrust: an editorial staff supervises its output, which is subsequently read and absorbed in an essentially one-way relationship by the newspaper's readers.

Newspapers helped build the new political system that would bring a turn to objectivity and distance for the press, a process that spread the top-down approach to a new structure. As the speed of development in the United States accelerated during the last half of the nineteenth century, urbanization became the motor of change across the country, and a new political elite – the city boss – emerged to claim partial control of discourse and engagement. At the same time, editors maintained their roles as leaders and power-brokers. The introduction of new technologies, and exciting economic and social changes for the nation gave them opportunities to expand discourse as well as guide it. During the end of the nineteenth century and the transition into a new one, the pillars of democracy in the United States continued to grow and change according to the times.

Even as the mechanisms of discourse changed, however, the underlying structures of power and control remained as they were since the nation's birth. The selection and dissemination of news and information was always top-down, with political elites holding the most influence and the vast majority of Americans acting primarily as consumers of what was offered them. By the end of the nineteenth century, most urban Americans had

even been reduced to political commodities as city bosses stepped into a power vacuum and capitalized on the opportunities of a transitioning society, gathering and selling votes to political allies. Changing social, economic, and technological conditions in the United States generated excitement and influenced many aspects of political discourse, but could not alter the fundamental hierarchies that girded American politics.

### **Early American Newspapers as the Originators of the Party System**

The newspapers of the revolutionary era bore little resemblance to today's newspapers that place so much emphasis on widespread appeal and political independence. For one thing, the new nation was still a fragmented society and simple geography was a barrier that kept circulation limited to the range of the individual printer and his press. The additional burden of technology was enough to put the ceiling of even the most successful city publications at a few thousand copies (Pasley 2001, 7). The professional newspaper reporter hadn't been born yet; to fill their pages, editors relied on a free exchange with other newspapers and reprinted the stories they chose as appropriate and relevant. Only the "more ambitious" of editors would ever attempt to fill the columns of his paper entirely with his own writings (Pasley 2001, 9). Finally, the pool of potential readers was much smaller, with literacy a privilege of primarily wealthy, white men (Pasley 2001, 7).

As a result of this narrow reach, the first American newspapers were printed for a specific demographic – political elites. Since the period of foreign colonization, newspapers had been aimed at "the best men" (Barnhurst and Nerone 2001, 35): the powerful and influential figures responsible for representing the policies of authority and

bridging the gap between legislation and practical, local enforcement. With the formation of the United States, the federal government made concerted efforts to utilize and strengthen the network of newspapers already in place. Censorship and monitoring of newspapers sent through the mail were restricted. No taxes were established to limit the financial abilities of printers, and extremely favorable postage rates for newspapers were set up (especially for small local and rural newspapers). Government printing needs were handled by private companies, instead of through the creation of publicly-owned printing facilities, and Congressional representatives looking to assist their constituents decentralized the printing of laws, contracts and other important documents by giving that responsibility to the states (Pasley 2001, 48-49). The outcome of such careful management of the fledgling American press was “to amplify the role and potential power of the political editor, whose paper both embodied the party locally (in the shape he chose) and represented its political locality (through items and essays picked up by other papers) to the outside world” (Pasley 2001, 50). Through the newspaper editor, information moved to other elites in a top-down manner – information which was filtered, parsed and presented according to the perspective and agenda of one powerful individual.

These political editors did not squander the potential of the power they held. Long before the United States had the entrenched party system with which we are familiar today, partisan newspapers were laying the groundwork by exclusively disseminating the ideals of the editor's personal leaning to the widest possible group of consumers. Indeed, in a time and place where no other technology permitted the kind of communication and debate that newspapers allowed, “new political groups founded or secured control of

newspapers before they did almost anything else, and in many cases a newspaper originated a movement nearly on its own” (Pasley 2001, 9). In other words, the newspaper was the hub of local political activity. This put the editor in a unique role, with the power to sway an unparalleled number of citizens (and potential votes) toward the cause of his particular movement.

The central role of newspapers in nineteenth-century politics made newspaper editors the most pivotal and characteristic political figures of the era... Party newspaper editors occupied the nodal points of the political system. While newspapers themselves provided the linkages [between party members and candidates], it was the editors who controlled them, using their newspapers to direct the affairs of the party and coordinate its message. ... Each editor was his party's principal spokesman, supplier of ideology, and enforcer of discipline in the area and political level he served. In a very real sense, he was the party's face and voice. (Pasley 2001, 13)

Beginning with its earliest years, the culture of political discourse in the United States rested squarely on the shoulders of the newspaper editors who were unrivaled party and community organizers. Though the nature of that power (and responsibility) was changing even as it crystallized, it would not soon fade or shift.

### **1820s – 1880s: Widening Audiences and Increasing Influence**

As the accelerated political and economic growth of the country spread during the 1820s, the role of newspapers in political discourse began to change as well. In the early 1800s, the *National Intelligencer* became one of the first periodicals in the United States to find financial success through more objective reporting, focusing on the proceedings and output of Congress and the rest of the national government (Emery 1972, 142). The Industrial Revolution was powering a complete renovation of the American economy, giving birth to a new class of citizens deriving their existence from the new infrastructure branching out of the growing cities. Thanks to the increased literacy and density of the

American population, the United States in the 1820s could lay claim to the highest per capita newspaper readership in the world, surpassing even Great Britain's circulation by three million annually (Emery 1972, 150). Yet newspapers throughout the nation still catered predominantly to the upper crust of society, where political power was concentrated among elites. There was a widening inconsistency between newspapers' readership and its content; "what the nation needed was a newspaper press that could reach deeper into the masses" (Emery 1972, 150).

The further democratization of newspapers began in 1828, the same year that the presidential elections sparked what would later be hailed as the Jacksonian Revolution. As more and more members of the working class demanded that their votes be counted, new publications were created to ensure that their voices would be heard. The *Mechanic's Free Press*, founded in 1828, was the first successful labor newspaper to emerge (Emery 1972, 155-156). Labor newspapers, though oftentimes just as partisan as the publications they were meant to counter, provided "labor information that the commercial press ignored" (Emery 1972, 156). In many ways these newspapers were more progressive than their mainstream competition in their objective and accurate portrayal of events (Emery 1972, 156). More important is the fact that simply by representing an alternative perspective from the mainstream press, labor newspapers widened the range of information and opinions within public discourse.

The commercial success of newspapers like the *Mechanic's Free Press* proved that there was a market for printers to maintain healthy businesses that also targeted a wider group of people than before. Prior to this time, newspapers were "edited for people of means" and most newspapers were paid for on the basis of a yearly subscription,

which put them out of reach for families with more modest incomes (Emery 1972, 166). But now new readers were looking for a way to get their fill of the news – news that concerned them and affected their livelihoods – and they “began to show a little more interest in the government they had the power to control” (Emery 1972, 168-169). Printers quickly responded to meet this burgeoning demand. When vast improvements in printing press technology allowed far more copies to be printed each day, the stage was set for a new type of newspaper to prevail, and the daily made its way onto the city streets. The daily put current events within reach of the “common man” with its one-cent price and availability on every street corner (Emery 1972, 166). Soon urban centers like New York City were deluged with up-and-coming dailies; many were full of sensationalism and bad journalism, but many others began to redefine the world of news reporting. Yet even as the outward appearance of journalism evolved, the underlying structure – editorial control over the scope and focus of news reporting – was preserved.

An important new feature of these mass appeal newspapers was the straw poll, first introduced during the 1824 presidential election campaigns. Straw polls were generally informal surveys of opinion, conducted at first mostly by citizens and party officials to gather more detailed information about the levels of support for their favored candidate, or the opposition (Herbst 1993, 70). The data from these early polls were used, like more sophisticated polls today, to survey the political mood in a given community or region, as well as to “denigrate opposing candidates or boost the morale of the rank and file in one's own party” (Herbst 1993, 69). Straw polls quickly grew in popularity and the excitement they caused piqued the interest of newspaper editors seeking to boost readership and add relevance and immediacy to their news coverage (Herbst 1993, 70).

The straw poll soon became a staple of the newspapers cultivating a “common man” image. The popularity of the straw poll (nicknamed the “straw” by journalists) was rooted in the high levels of political participation of the day, which yielded 70-80% voter turnout in national elections every cycle (Herbst 1993, 75). In the middle of the nineteenth century, “men gained enormous pleasure from political activities and engaging in political discourse. The straw was a popular channel of political participation and communication during election years” (Herbst 1993, 86). Straw polls took on significance for citizens as an exciting tool that could both demonstrate the strength of their chosen candidate and help them gain leverage in swaying friends, family members and colleagues to the cause of the campaign (Herbst 1993, 80). For newspaper editors, straws served a similar dual role. Through the policy of publishing polls sent to the newspaper by readers, in addition to those compiled by traveling journalists, a newspaper could lay claim to a wide readership and representation of the democratic values that were sweeping the nation. From an editorial standpoint, polls were just as important in supporting the views put forth by the editor:

Straws were viewed as powerful and important rhetorically, since they gave the impression that a favored candidate would win the upcoming election. A straw demonstrating that one's candidate led in popularity (if only among a small group of citizens) served a very specific discursive function: It wasn't only the paper's editors or party officials who supported the prospective president. Polls were *reports from the field* telling readers that they were not alone in their political beliefs. On the contrary, supporters of their favored candidate were everywhere. (Herbst 1993, 86)

For this reason, straw polls published in any given newspaper fell far short of presenting an objective snapshot of political opinion in the country. Polls were far more likely to be published by an editor if they were aligned with his political leanings, and “projected a clear and decisive victory for the newspaper's favored candidate” (Herbst

1993, 81). As a metric that both widened political discourse and focused it (and as the precursor to more accurate polling methods that would follow), the straw poll was a significant product of the nineteenth century, but it did little overall to alter the fundamental top-down philosophy of discourse that prevailed in the United States.

The 1841 publication of the first day's copy of Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune* marked another step forward in the development of newspapers with mass appeal and more objective reporting. Rather than embracing the culture of sensationalism that had gripped most daily newspapers, Greeley sought to build in his *Tribune* “a promoter of culture and stimulating ideas” that would be accessible to the new working class of the United States (Emery 1972, 180). The *New York Tribune* sought to raise the lowest common denominator in public discourse, rather than pander to it. The editorials Greeley published through his newspaper would often lean toward irrational and divisive proposals and opinions that clashed with many of his readers living outside the cities within the northeastern region of the country. Still, the *Tribune* was by most measurements one of the most successful of its time, because of “[Greeley's] consciousness of responsibility to the reader. ... [T]he average reader appeared to understand that the motives were sincere” (Emery 1972, 179).

The bombast of the *New York Tribune* was complemented in 1851 by the foundation of *The New York Times* by Henry Raymond. With the same desire to bring objective and important reporting to the masses, but with an equal desire to avoid the outspoken nature of Greeley's editorializing, Raymond created in the *Times* a newspaper that was “invariably fair in tone, if not in content, and no rival equaled it in developing



the technique of careful reporting” (Emery 1972, 182). The combination of the *Tribune* and the *Times* established a foundation of responsibility and dedication to the news that would mark their editors as two of the most important men of their generation.

The United States had undergone dramatic changes in the half-century since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Politically and economically, the Industrial Revolution and Manifest Destiny had transformed the culture, as the goals of every American expanded as quickly as the country's new borders. Increasing numbers were moving into cities, shortening the distances between people. The invention of the telegraph in 1844 was as seminal an event as anything else leading up to it, and its introduction into daily business had a dramatic effect on the American press, at that time experiencing one of its biggest growth spurts (both in terms of size and maturity) in its history.

The revolutionary new ability to connect people at the speed of light coincided with the trends toward mass appeal and accuracy, with important consequences. National newspapers were quick to establish political bureaus in Washington, D.C. The *Baltimore Sun* was an innovator in its use of the telegraph to deliver “complete and accurate coverage of national news” (Emery 1972, 174) – both to its readers and to other newspapers willing to pay for it. The editors of the biggest New York dailies banded together in 1848 to create what would eventually be known as the Associated Press, in order to capitalize on the new opportunity to sell their news to the new daily newspapers emerging in many of the smaller cities and towns – places where news on a daily basis was simply an impossible commodity, until telegraph wires connected them directly to the source (Emery 1972, 198).

Underneath all of these dizzying changes to journalism, however, the influential editor was still leading the way. The role of the editor in the mid-1800s was not identical to what it had been at the turn of the century, but his influence over political discourse was still strong. There was “a shift away from political partisanship” (Emery 1972, 170), but the growth of independence in newspapers was not unwelcome to newspaper editors who embraced their chance to empower a new class of Americans through political discourse. Many of them were men who “saw political editing as an opportunity to make a living by doing good, to be defenders of the republic by occupation” (Pasley 2001, 23). They sought to bring accurate and comprehensive news reporting to a neglected class of citizens, and many succeeded.

In so doing, editors cemented their influence over political discourse even as they refined it. With expanded coverage of national political news made possible by the telegraph, newspapers became an indispensable source for government officials who “began to follow the paper closely for trends in political development” (Emery 1972, 174), ensuring that newspapers remained centrally important to the policy debates of the day. The spread of dailies beyond the big metropolitan centers was accompanied by the establishment of the wire service, which meant that small-town dailies developed a reliance on the big-city editors who decided what would be included in every Associated Press dispatch. It is no coincidence that the pioneering editors of the mid-1800s – Horace Greeley, Henry Raymond, Thurlow Weed – are included among the most important American political elites of the century.

### **1880s – 1930s: Urban Consolidation**

The United States in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth century could be characterized by many changes, but few were as important or dramatic as the explosion of urban life. Indeed, as the nation was swept up in social, technological, economic and demographic revolution, “[n]owhere were these forces more profound or their consequences more apparent than in the larger cities” (Brownell 1973, xi). The sheer enormity of the migration to urban centers was as important a factor as the new ways of life that developed there. Before the shift began in the 1880s, cities were not a central aspect of American culture: less than 20% of the population could be classified as urban-dwelling, and there were only twenty cities with populations exceeding 100,000 people.

By 1920, there were 68 urban areas in the United States and three cities alone (New York City, Chicago and Philadelphia) accounted for more than ten million Americans; the total number of people in cities of at least 250,000 had quintupled from 4.5 million to 21 million (Brownell 1973, xi). In light of such concentrated expansion, it is no surprise that many aspects of American society were being remade, and those cornerstones of democracy – political activity and the press – were significantly affected. Yet the underlying nature of the transformation to these two disciplines was inherently similar, and still aligned with their top-down heritage.

Like so many other parts of the American experience, the history of the press is a cyclical one. After the many successes and progressions in the newspaper industry during the middle part of the century, dailies suffered a slide back into sensationalism. It wasn't until the latter part of the nineteenth century that a “New Journalism” began to take

shape, spurred on by the transformation of the country as it moved into modern times. In the years between 1870 and the beginning of the twentieth century, the population of the United States doubled in size. City-dwellers, quickly redefining the face of the nation, tripled in numbers in that same period (Emery 1972, 285). The country as a whole was much more unified and interdependent than it had once been; urban centers were the junctions of this growing national network. The daily newspaper, as one of the new hallmarks of a bustling metropolis, was “the chronicler of the national scene, the interpreter of the new environment” (Emery 1972, 286). Change was occurring at such a breakneck pace that there was no time to collect one's thoughts or stand back from it all.

Instead, Americans “turned to the daily newspapers for the story of their urban life and their common interests” (Emery 1972, 285). The newspapers led by the able editors embraced this challenge and remade their products to fit the times. Joseph Pulitzer, the embodiment of the editorial reaction to the changing times, attached this statement to the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, the first of his two influential newspapers:

The *Post and Dispatch* will serve no party but the people; be no organ of Republicanism, but the organ of truth; will follow no causes but its conclusions; will not support the 'Administration,' but criticise it; will oppose all frauds and shams wherever and whatever they are; will advocate principles and ideas rather than prejudices and partisanship. (Emery 1972, 310-11)

Building on the principles first introduced by Greeley's *New York Tribune* and Raymond's *New York Times*, the progressive papers of New Journalism recognized that news reporting had solidified as the “primary obligation of the press” and that blatant partisanship was no longer acceptable (Emery 1972, 261). But the influence of newspapers (and those responsible for its publication) was still a central factor in political discourse. Indeed, more Americans than ever relied on newspapers as consumers at the end of a one-way flow of information and commentary.

In accordance with the economic expansion of the times, by the 1890s most of the successful city dailies had become “corporate enterprise[s] rather than a personal venture” (Emery 1972, 285); they were no longer run by one all-powerful editor, but rather managed by an editorial staff, with multiple editors, specialized reporters, big staffs and expensive budgets (Emery 1972, 325). The growth of newspaper staffs, and the need to appeal to much larger readerships, made it harder to infuse as much partisanship and bias as had once characterized the successful newspapers in America.

The urban expansion in the United States had redefined the structure of politics in the same way it changed the newspaper industry. The new American landscape, jostled by new technology and societal concerns, and flooded with wave upon wave of new immigrants, quickly overwhelmed the existing government infrastructures on the national, state and local levels. The national political parties, “stalelated and equilibrated” (Brownell 1973, 1), could not respond appropriately to the new culture, resulting in “government inefficiency, duplication, stagnation, and a lack of cooperation between officials and lack of continuity between administrations” (Brownell 1973, 1-2). A gap had emerged between citizens and their government thanks to the emergence of new issues and priorities and the inadequate response of the existing political order.

Clever and opportunistic individuals stepped into the void, building effective networks and organizations under their own control, and becoming urban bosses – new political elites – in the process. They acted as brokers for the thousands of people in their neighborhoods who were struggling to deal with brand new economic and social pressures, and who had nowhere else to turn. The city boss could provide economic aid,

in the form of jobs, supplies and shelter; political strength, by securing licenses and permits, and expediting the processes that might otherwise stall businesses; and the boss could act as a sort of urban guide, by providing friendship and experience with city life, as well as building connections and a sense of community between his supporters (Brownell 1973, 3). In an era where most public officials were as unsure as their constituents about how to deal with the trials of urban life, the boss quickly became a figure uniquely relied upon during transition.

In exchange for his help, city bosses simply asked for political support, in the form of votes on Election Day toward the candidates of their choosing (economic compensation was also often part of the equation). The most powerful bosses had complex and extensive networks and chains of command snaking through their neighborhoods, down to the city-block level, or even into individual tenement buildings (Brownell 1973, 2). From these networks, they were able to keep in constant contact with their base, gather information and collect a dynamic survey of opinion, and use their expert knowledge of their part of the city to act as representatives (Herbst 1993, 106-107). The true source of the boss's political leverage, however, came from “the ability of his organization to... get out the vote” (Brownell 1973, 2). Ultimately, the basic aim of every urban boss, and the motivation behind the helping hand he constantly extended to his neighbors in need, was the translation of his constituency into a tradable commodity – votes – that he could present to eager politicians.

The methods to provide the votes were not uniform between regions of the country, or even from boss to boss in any given city. Some relied on charisma and popularity within their communities; some dangled economic and political incentives to

procure votes; and some bosses resorted to paying individuals from outside the community to come and vote on Election Day, or even hiring mercenaries to violently repress their opposition (Brownell 1973, 3). But at the heart of every process – however varied – was an individual, who had consolidated power and capital under his control through the aggregation of citizen support. Under the new political order of the urban boss, the top-down paradigm of discourse and engagement originating with newspapers and early party structures was preserved.

Consolidation had also become an important theme in the press, as daily newspapers flourished in the big cities and booming business fueled the increasing demand for information everywhere in America. The Associated Press had expanded its coverage across the country, and used partnerships to bring in news from across the Atlantic Ocean, but it had also consolidated its power as news distributor “into a monopolistic position” (Emery 1972, 330). The newspaper franchises under the umbrella of the AP monopoly enjoyed certain advantages over their non-licensed competitors; “[p]apers outside New York had many complaints against the AP service, however. The seven charter member New York morning papers decided what news should be included in the report, and preferred to compete among themselves for many of the major news stories, leaving only the more prosaic news for the AP.... [T]he outside papers felt they were paying too much of the cost and had too little say about the operations of the service” (Emery 1972, 330). Some of the smaller dailies elected to use services like that of the American Press Association, which sent pre-made plates with items from the AP wire stamped into them (Emery 1972, 331); it was an inexpensive route to take, but put

full editorial control over the selection of stories, style of writing and focus of reporting in the hands of the big agency. The methods of newspapers were changing again, but the inherent top-down element of editorial control was still intact.

This trend of consolidation, not simply limited to the press associations, worsened over the course of the first three decades of the new century (and would continue unabated into the twentieth century). Such a development was often most pronounced in the smaller American towns, where the residents did not share the luxury of many healthy dailies that those in places such as New York City and Chicago took for granted. In 1880, the number of cities with competing daily newspapers, 239, could be very favorably compared to the number of cities with only one daily, 149. The number of cities with more than one daily rose to nearly 700 by 1910, but in 1930 the number had plummeted back down nearly to the original figure. One-daily cities, on the other hand, had risen steadily to 1,002 and constituted 71.5% of the total number of cities with a daily newspaper<sup>2</sup> (Emery 1972, 443). In many cases – such as towns where there was not enough demand or variation among its residents to necessitate multiple daily newspapers – the consolidation that occurred was not a crushing blow to journalistic integrity, nor did it represent any malicious plots to mislead the public. Regardless, “[c]ompetition for the mass market discouraged individuality” (Emery 1972, 446), and wherever consolidation of readership arose, the consolidation of local editorial control into the hands of a smaller group than before inevitably followed close behind.

The mixed blessing of the press associations continued. Franchise members of the associations were receiving and printing articles that continued to represent much more

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<sup>2</sup> By 1971, only 162 cities with multiple dailies remained, and by 1980 that number had fallen to 40 cities out of more than 1,500 (Smith 1980, 9).



accurate and comprehensive coverage, and their familiar bylines came to represent “the symbols of trustworthy service from an outside source” (Emery 1972, 466). An increasingly united country was consuming and discussing similar current events, thanks to the wire services. Yet, “[a]t the same time the influence of the press associations upon the character of many daily newspapers [became] pronounced” (Emery 1972, 466). Much like the rest of the country, if not as overtly, the press in the United States was becoming increasingly centralized under top-down, monopolistic influences.

### **Conclusion**

The American political arena in the nineteenth century was defined primarily by the powerful elites who held remarkable amounts of power in their hands, many of whom devoted their lives to faithfully representing what they perceived were the interests of their country. Many of these men were honorable and responsible public servants, with a full appreciation for the significance of their positions. But the fact remains that, due in large part to the technological limitations of the day and the weight of convention, the exchanges conducted between public political figures and the greater public were disproportionately top-down. Editors and politicians both adhered to a mindset that in many ways rationalized individuals as commodities – paying readers, or votes – and the many changes in American life that transpired still did not make significant adjustments to this equation. Indeed, as the twentieth century approached, this paradigm was only reinforced by the economic and social changes that fueled the growth of businesses and urban environments. Even into the 1920s, it remained to be seen if a more equal balance could be struck between the opinion-makers and their politically interested base. As it

turned out, a series of important changes that began in the 1930s would once again shift, but not transform, the dynamics of discourse and engagement in America.

## *Chapter Two*

### The Professionalization and Specialization of American Politics

By the time of World War I, the top-down hierarchy of political activity in the United States was entrenched enough that it would take an event of significant proportions to shift the country from its usual course. The twentieth century ultimately bore witness to several transformative eras beginning with the Great Depression, but neither the sum nor the individual force of these periods were enough to alter the fundamental power structures of American political culture. Politically, questions and expectations about government and its role in American life shifted into a new framework and opened the door to a much more actively involved public sphere. Soon, many American citizens gradually found themselves thinking less about economic survival, and more about the rules and assumptions that guided cultural values. A backdrop of technological innovation was enough to combine with these broad changes and provoke a new way of thinking about the presentation and discussion of information. The news industry responded to these evolving expectations by emphasizing specialization and expertise within the field of journalism, which changed the role of the journalist in important ways.

In politics, a new class of professionals swelled the ranks of political elites holding much of the power over discourse and engagement. The 1950s marked the beginning of an era in which political campaigns would come to be inundated and dominated by paid consultants specializing in the many crucial aspects of a winning candidacy. At the same time, interest groups emerged out of the victories of the civil rights and anti-war movements and similarly gained massive amounts of political capital

in campaigning and legislation during the decades that followed. These new brokers evolved during a period in which traditional coalitions and relationships were fractured by a vastly more complicated political agenda, and they sought to address concerns about that agenda through a much more dedicated approach to discourse and policy in the United States. Though it is not clear that they always succeeded in this regard, there can be no mistaking the shift in political maneuvering that they provoked. By the close of the twentieth century, American non-elites – which is to say, the vast majority of the population – had been increasingly marginalized and weakened.

### **Interpretive Journalism: Increased Specialization in the News Media**

Due to the convergence of several factors, the period of American development during the 1930s and 1940s had an important effect on political discourse and engagement. The disaster of the Great Depression put sufficient pressure on nearly all levels of society to force a change in philosophy of government, from the free-enterprise leanings of economic non-intervention to the unprecedented approach of Roosevelt's New Deal. The success of the New Deal, combined with the mobilization of a wartime economy, led to a rejuvenated economy in the United States and made it possible for the emerging middle class in America to focus on new issues. Technological innovation continued to connect the national population in new ways, which led increasingly informed citizens to ask tougher questions of their elected officials and themselves. Two such innovations in broadcast media, radio and television, emerged during those two decades and were especially central in reshaping the texture of news and discourse. Changes in journalism during these two decades foreshadowed similar changes to other

political environments that would follow later in the century.

Through World War I and the 1920s, the press in the United States had followed much the same trajectory as it had since the latter part of the nineteenth century. In the 1930s and 1940s, however, newspaper journalism underwent a crucial change: reporters began increasingly to interpret as well as recount the events contained in their articles. Interpretive journalism was the natural progression of a country that had grown smarter and technologically more advanced, politically and economically more complicated, more socially diverse, and much more involved internationally since the end of World War I. It arose to answer the growing questions of an informed populace: “‘Why’ became important, along with the traditional ‘who did what,’ because the reader, more than ever, wanted and needed to know the meaning of the news” (Emery 1972, 562). Editors and reporters were forced to redefine long-held notions of what went into a newspaper, as well as how to present it. At the heart of this groundbreaking shift was *context*: readers were no longer satisfied simply to be told what had happened. They needed to know what made it significant and newsworthy.

Comprehensive knowledge was the only resource that would allow reporters to lead their readers to the complex understanding they demanded, and so reporters became experts. The writing staffs of the leading newspapers quickly transformed into a team of specialists, with the experience and the insight to provide “explanatory interpretation” of news related to labor, the economy, science, health, education and any other discipline marked as sufficiently intriguing (all of which were complicated and intertwined with the others) (Emery 1972, 563-66). One element of newspapers that was altered by the move

toward expertise was the use of public opinion polls in news stories and editorializing. Straw polls had been popular staples of newspapers since their introduction in the mid-1800s, but by the 1920s their importance had diminished. As a method of measuring public sentiment, the straw poll was far too informal and plagued by inaccuracy to fit the new style of interpretive journalism. Instead, editors and reporters seeking to give context to complicated national issues began to take a much more active interest in the social sciences and methodological research disciplines; specifically, they focused on the random sample survey as a tool for crafting arguments that could be more accurately and powerfully presented than ever before (Herbst 1993, 115-116). The use of polls in newspapers answered a need to demonstrate accuracy, greater objectivity and relevance; as a result, “[t]he ability to accurately predict election outcomes became much more important than collecting the opinions of factory workers and neighbors. ... By 1936, newspapers were much more interested in the precision of sample survey results than in giving voice to communities and groups wishing to contribute their own versions of public opinion” (Herbst 1993, 83-85). The adoption of new polling techniques highlights the growing emphasis on the interpretation, rather than display, of public opinion, and on a more fundamental shift in journalism toward expertise and specialization.

As with the invention of the telegraph in 1844 and the rising prominence of mass-appeal daily newspapers, the paradigm shift of interpretive journalism once again coincided with the invention of an watershed new technology: radio broadcasting.

The first radio stations broadcasting news were no more than extensions of local newspapers looking for a way to “gain goodwill and sell papers” (Emery 1972, 589).

When the technology first began to be used for spreading the news, there was already a dynamic and competent press corps playing an important part in the democratic process. A century and a half of tradition in the print media greeted radio innovators with specific rules and assumptions that would guide their policies. But in many ways, convention was not nearly enough to contain this new medium which had the power to transport its listeners to places as far away as European battlefields, or which could bring the President of the United States himself into the living room of any family in the country.

The phenomenon began in 1920. By 1921 there were 50,000 radio receivers in the United States, and within another year 600,000 radios had spread throughout the nation. In 1924, when radios were used to report the returns from the presidential election, ten million Americans were listening in, on three million sets (Emery 1972, 590-593). NBC and CBS began their operations in 1926 and 1928, respectively; by the end of the 1928 presidential election and inauguration, the significance of radio news as a news medium had been solidified, with voters “able, vicariously, to attend the conventions” and receive “new insight into the democratic process.” The inauguration of President Herbert Hoover that winter drew an incredible sixty million listeners – a record number at the time (Bliss 1991, 23-24).

Up to that point, radio news coverage had yet to coalesce around the concept of professional newscasters, with structured programming; instead, radio news was almost exclusively “snippets of news” – brief reports on exciting events that had happened that day, read by the regular radio announcer of the station (Bliss 1991, 24). Catering to an exploding interest in, and with a better understanding of, news delivered by radio, CBS and NBC delivered unprecedented “swift and complete election coverage” in 1932 (Bliss

1991, 41). President Roosevelt also had a keen appreciation for the power of radio, and began in that same year the Fireside Chats “which enabled him to speak directly to the American people over the heads of reporters and editors” (Bliss 1991, 52). By 1933, Roosevelt's speeches were, through the rapidly expanding networks, reaching as many as sixty million listeners in twenty million homes (Bliss 1991, 32).

The top-down editorial influence in newspapers was just as evident in radio stations, where the editor's equivalent (the program manager, station manager, owner, and eventually the news director) “decided what news to carry” (Bliss 1991, 46), manifesting the same inevitable guidance of public awareness as every newspaper editor. During the 1930s, radio news reporting underwent the same shift towards interpretive journalism that newspapers were experiencing. In a format that complemented the growing trend of reporters becoming experts on particular subjects and offering commentary on current events, radio news programs had the ability to bring in actual experts and guests to discuss the news and contribute their opinions (Bliss 1991, 68-69).

The immediacy of such programming was one of the reasons radio news came into its own during World War II and “won a place of prime importance” in American public discourse (Emery 1972, 597). Reporters working through the radio medium had many tools that newspaper journalism simply could not rival. Starting with Germany's annexation of Austria, CBS began to run foreign news roundups, with reporters spread across Europe discussing current events with one another. This dramatic format, combined with the sheer volume and frequency of newscasts on a daily basis (the typical affiliate station of the mid 1940s broadcast, each day, seven newscasts of up to fifteen minutes each (Bliss 1991, 181)), gave the news “an immediacy newspapers could not



provide” (Bliss 1991, 86). When America was provoked into joining the fight, the sounds of the United States at war were delivered straight into the homes of American families: descriptions of the bombing of Pearl Harbor minutes after it occurred; the first ever broadcasts from the White House, after the emergency Cabinet meeting to discuss the attack; Congress' resolution to declare war on Japan, live from the Capitol Building; and most dramatically, the sounds of D-Day caught on tape by reporters on the beachheads of Normandy (Bliss 1991, 135-157). World War II made it crystal clear that “radio had dimensions – instantaneity and sound – which newspapers did not have” (Bliss 1991, 129), nor could ever hope to parallel.

The editorial policies of radio news programs on the major networks during World War II emphasized the new philosophy that had emerged in the age of interpretive journalism. In a memo issued for CBS correspondents, objectivity and restraint were stressed, but it was also asserted that “in a democracy it is important that people not only should know but understand, and [news analysts'] function is to help the listener to understand, to weigh, and to judge, but not to do the judging for him” (Bliss 1991, 107). Like the shift in newspaper writing, context was now seen as critical to the success of the journalist's report as well as to the satisfaction of the listener. After the United States entered the war, a new CBS memo continued to stress that Americans needed to be kept educated, but an additional point underlined the responsibility that leaders in both media felt about their roles in steering public discourse:

This is a war for the preservation of democracy. The American people must not only always be kept vividly aware of this objective, but the value of every man, woman, and child in the nation of preserving democracy. (Bliss 1991, 139)

The top-down editorial control over the presentation and undertone of facts is evident. Despite the many textural differences between radio and newspapers, there was a

strong similarity philosophically between the two media, even as they matured and evolved.

After peace was achieved and World War II ended in both the European and Pacific theaters, radio news turned its focus back on domestic issues (Bliss 1991, 180), the number of radio stations doubled in the decade between 1940 and 1950, and the quality of programming on the new stations improved as well (Emery 1972, 599). But the strongest years of radio journalism were short-lived, as television revolutionized the news with the combination of sight and sound. They were important years, however – especially during World War II when the innovation of sound “did much to awaken a still neutral United States to the nature of the war” (Emery 1972, 599) – and the radio played an integral role in reshaping the image of the press. As Americans learned to trust the radio newscasters – figures like H. V. Kaltenborn, Elmer Davis and Edward R. Murrow (Emery 1972, 598) – the concept of individual reporters as trustworthy, visible leaders of public discourse gained traction and set the stage for the even more dramatic developments of television news.

News reporting in the United States had begun as a mode of communication between the elite, influential agents of political change and the citizens spread throughout the country who were relied upon to bolster their causes with direct action. In many ways, those early newspapers were not all too different from propaganda: they argued in very partisan terms and were centrally important to the success of politicians everywhere. The press was a top-down medium, and even as it shed the partisan nature of its tone in

favor of the more distanced objectivity that began to emerge midway through the nineteenth century, it retained that essential characteristic. The newspaper editor was no longer “the party's face and voice” (Pasley 2001, 13), but he was still entrusted with tremendous power and responsibility over the political awareness of others, as each day he decided what stories would run and what kind of portrait of the country his paper would present. The editors with the biggest circulations, or with decision-making power over what went into the daily package of stories sent out by the press associations, had an even greater power over the topics of discussion in cities across the country. Editors on the whole understood, and respected, their position as opinion-makers; editing was not just the “task of telling readers what they need to know” (Smith 1980, 263), but also a responsibility “to serve no party but the people” (Emery 1972, 310). Yet, regardless of intent, formalized political discourse in the United States was unarguably controlled by a disproportionately small group of elites with minimal interaction with, or accountability to, the much larger population of non-elite citizens.

The top-down basis of news reporting did not change with the advent of interpretive journalism, but the role of reporters did. “[T]elling readers what they need to know” had to be joined with telling them why they needed to know it, and that began the process that would shift journalism away from its position as an invisible occupation. The introduction of new technology upset the traditional equation of reporting the news even further: being informed was hearing the news, as well as reading it, and radio news reporting added a texture and immediacy to current events that newspapers were unable to rival. Print reporters had to adjust or be pushed to the margins. This threat to the traditional press (and, eventually, the even more serious threat of television news

reporting) motivated newspapers to develop “a much more detailed and investigative type of coverage” (Smith 1980, 35). The cumulative result of so many new factors was as inevitable as it was well-intentioned: reporters became much more visible in their reporting, gradually moving “the journalist, not the newsmaker, [to] the center” (Patterson 2003, 67). Journalists became the translators and the experts of the news they were reporting. Within the span of just a few decades, the philosophy of the press – and the relationship of journalists to its readers and its subjects – had changed. The consequences of specialization and increased expert analysis for the news media were even less dramatic than the ramifications of similar processes in politics.

### **The Explosion of Interest Groups, Political Consultants and Television News**

If the 1930s and 1940s were the period when interpretive journalism began the process of creating a more noticeable gap between the elites and non-elites of formalized discourse, then the decades that followed it must certainly be characterized as the era when that paradigm solidified in American politics. As in every period before it, the strength and focus of the United States were essential factors in guiding this change, and many aspects of American culture were derived from the changes of the New Deal and World War II. Momentum was building toward significant change in politics, and the results of the change greatly altered how people would communicate and interact with their government.

The prosperity of the United States in the years following World War II had a unique effect on national sentiment: economic issues slowly began to fade in importance

for most Americans, for the first time in history. Between 1947 and 1972, the median family income doubled. The percentage of families earning at least \$10,000 each year quadrupled in the same time span, from 15% to 60%, and “a large proportion of the population began to enjoy substantial discretionary income and moved beyond subsistence” (Cigler and Loomis 2002, 19). The result of such a monumental development was a new shift in discourse away from strictly economic issues, to ones of social and moral significance; what Allan Cigler and Burdett Loomis have termed “[v]alence issues – general evaluations of the goodness or badness of the times” (Cigler and Loomis 2002, 20). This was only strengthened by a pattern of government expansion into new parts of life that had been happening since the New Deal (Cigler and Loomis 2002, 14). The shift led to a subsequent weakening of the major political parties, because the varying degrees of interest and positioning across the nation on these sensitive topics fractured the traditional coalitions that held the parties together (Cigler and Loomis 2002, 20).

In the same manner that urban political bosses filled an empty niche during the changes of the 1880s, the single-issue interest group emerged as the most effective organization to confront these divisive new debates of the post-war era. After the successes of the civil rights movement and the anti-war mobilization in the 1960s and 1970s, many Americans saw parallels between those struggles and their own priorities for change, and powerful new groups coalesced around them. The first successful interest groups were mostly championing progressive causes, like Cesar Chavez' United Farm Workers Union and the National Organization for Women (Berry 1997, 30). The growth of such interest groups was exponential, both in terms of the numbers of new groups and

the expansion in numbers of the most successful groups. Common Cause, a government reform interest group, was founded in 1970; within one year, it had attracted 230,000 members using newspaper ads and direct mailing strategies (Berry 1997, 31). The biggest growth area for interest groups was political action committees, or PACs, after federal restrictions on their activities were relaxed in 1974: in less than a decade they multiplied from 608 separate PACs to 2,551 (Berry 1997, 22). The growing constituencies of so many interest groups and the lessening ability of the political parties to effectively confront many of the most important issues of the day combined to provide serious legitimacy to these new interest groups.

In response, politicians granted interest groups improved access to the political process. In the 1970s, the legislative process was made much more transparent and accessible to public view, creating “a much larger number of access points for today's lobbyists” (Cigler and Loomis 2002, 28). Some prominent officials, including President Carter, actively encouraged the participation of interest groups by bringing them into the legislative process and even appointing leaders of some powerful organizations as heads of government agencies and departments (Berry 1997, 34). In many cases, access was even further enhanced by the simple fact that many lobbyists were former elected officials relying on their experience and network of contacts throughout government (Cigler and Loomis 2002, 27).

These important factors, as well as the increasing centrality of money in politics, have combined over the decades to make interest groups what R. Karl Rethemeyer calls “the prime movers in current forms of representative democracy” (Rethemeyer 2007, 200). The broader result of this development has been the expansion of – and increased

reliance on – an upper layer of political elites in American politics. This has put an added emphasis on expertise, as organizations were increasingly formed to focus on a single issue, and as the scope and complexity of government regulation deepened (Rethemeyer 2007, 201).

Without a doubt, there have been many positive consequences of such a rearrangement of the public process. Many issues, and even more voices, have been paid the attention they deserve thanks to the tireless efforts of experienced lobbyists. But there have been many negative repercussions, as well. Though many interest groups have helped put policies into action that bring benefits to the citizens that compose their base of support, “middleman organizations do not usually evaluate government programs according to the criteria used by recipient groups; rather, what is important to them is the relationship between the program and the well-being of their organizations” (Cigler and Loomis 2002, 14). Therefore, the groups that are relied upon to influence important policy decisions on behalf of American citizens (Cigler and Loomis 2002, 14) are not necessarily pursuing the same priorities as those of the people whose needs they were formed to represent.

Furthermore, due in part to increased partisanship (Hetherington and Keefe 2007, 25) and the demands of the “permanent campaign” (Cigler and Loomis 2002, 30), political parties and their representatives in the halls of government are much more likely to respond to the claims of “organized interests... whose support (or opposition) can make a difference at the polls” (Hetherington and Keefe 2007, 5) instead of the demands of individual voices unrepresented in Washington. The consistent result of interest groups' lopsided power has been a decrease in “disinterested decision making [and] graceful

[compromise] on most issues” (Cigler and Loomis 2002, 28). Indeed, as the interests of those without interest group representation in government continue to be pushed to the sidelines, “no problem of representation in the United States is more important than that of finding ways to move the claims of the unorganized public onto the political agenda” (Hetherington and Keefe 2007, 5). As the prominence and political capital of elites grew throughout the twentieth century, non-elite Americans were marginalized and weakened.

This alarming trend coincided with the increasing professionalization of political campaigning in the United States. Professional campaign strategists had been in existence since the turn of the twentieth century, but after World War II, reliance on consultants began to be the rule. For his 1952 presidential campaign, Dwight Eisenhower hired advertising experts to craft catchy slogans (Burton and Shea 2001, 3), and within two decades paid operatives “[f]amiliar with the tools of public relations and product marketing” were being used extensively by candidates who could not rely on old-style party politics and instead had to run personality-driven campaigns (Burton and Shea 2001, 8). Today, “few serious candidates above the local level try to run a campaign without benefit of professional consultancy services” (Burton and Shea 2001, 12). National and statewide elections are saturated with consultants, and the elections occurring below the state level, such as state legislature or mayoral campaigns in medium-sized cities, are quickly following the trend (Johnson 2001, xiii-xv).

Campaign consultants act as experts who can craft strategy and oversee the execution of the many elements of a modern campaign, including fundraising, voter contact, message crafting and public opinion polling (Burton and Shea 2001, 12). The most successful consultants are highly sought-after players in politics, and so they are



constantly campaigning, moving from one election to the next (Johnson, xvi). The campaigning industry is “a profit-based enterprise” and the top consultants can earn massive amounts of money – often based directly on campaign expenditures – for their services (Burton and Shea 2001, 8). Because of their frantic careers, professional operatives can bring efficiency and results to a campaign, but “the professional is at least one or two emotional levels removed from the intensity and personal involvement in most amateur campaigners” (Johnson 2001, xvi).

In the 1990s, it was estimated that there were approximately seven thousand political consultants making their livings from the constant cycle of elections in the United States (Johnson 2001, xiii). These individuals are central to any viable campaign and depended on by candidates to guide them to victory on Election Day. As a result, “[m]odern campaigns, increasingly sophisticated and technologically complex, are being taken over by professional consultants, and because of that professionalization, there is little room for the amateur or volunteer campaign worker. Thanks in large measure to professional campaign strategies, citizens are increasingly disenchanted spectators in the blood sport of campaigning” (Johnson 2001, xvi). Just as interest group politics have functioned in many ways to marginalize individual citizens, the new calculus of campaigning has given birth to a national guild of political elites wielding increasing levels of influence over the political process.

Dramatic shifts in American politics have also accompanied the evolution of television news. Television, as a medium for news, introduced incredible changes to the way Americans learn about their world. Where newspapers could only describe, and

radio could only retell, television could recreate any event accessible to cameramen. Presidential debates, military battles, political rallies, scientific advances: all of these and more were suddenly transported with startling clarity into millions of homes. In the same ways that newspapers and radio strengthened connections between Americans and made far-off events relevant, television narrowed the gap between the news and the audience even more, while also boosting the sense of realism.

In terms of its contributions to journalistic philosophies about discourse, however, the negative consequences of television news gradually began to outweigh its many positive aspects. Interpretive journalism of the 1930s and 1940s, in print and on the radio, had already altered the identity and visibility of the news media in political discourse. The introduction of television to news reporting meant that reporters' self-important notions of their roles were reinforced, and new notions about the dramatics of news further complicated presentation and style. Ultimately, new trends in journalism would emerge and threaten to weaken two pillars of democracy – political discourse and participation – that the press had long fought to champion and protect.

Like radio before it, news reports on television began operating under the rules and assumptions that defined its predecessor, and the first TV news bulletins in the 1950s were simple affairs consisting “mainly of headline news gathered by newspapers and wire services,” followed by the half-hour, “picture-centered” newscasts launched in 1963 (Patterson 2003, 66). The networks quickly realized, however, that the medium of television was much different than radio and newspapers. Newscasts could not work the same way that they always had because “straightforward description seemed dull when

told to a viewing audience” (Patterson 2003, 66). The executive producer of NBC's nightly news program, Revuen Frank, came up with a change in approach that would have long-lasting consequences for all aspects of the news media:

“Every news story should, without any sacrifice of probity or responsibility, display the attributes of fiction, or drama. It should have structure and conflict, problem and denouement, rising action and falling action, a beginning, a middle and an end.” (Patterson 2003, 66)

Journalists changed roles again, this time shifting from expert translators to storytellers. The facts were still used to create the narrative and explain the context of the event, but the emphasis on drama was an alteration to the philosophy of news reporting that compounded the changes of interpretive journalism. Reporters, who after years on the job were much more cynical about the political process than their audience (Patterson 2003, 70), inevitably began to cast the news in a new light. In TV newscasts, the 1972 presidential election “was a spectacular struggle: rapid followers, dramatic do-or-die battles, strategy, tactics, winner and losers. Far down the list were issues of policy and leadership” (Patterson 2003, 69). Spurred on by the competition, newspapers followed suit and began to emphasize new, dramatic aspects of the story. An academic study of polls published in articles by *The New York Times* during the 1980, 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns demonstrated that polls were used more and more as the campaigning wore on, and that they were most often used in articles describing the competitive, tactics-driven aspect of political campaigns (Herbst 1993, 116). Not surprisingly, the need for drama in the news had moved the spotlight from the issues at stake to the more attention-grabbing struggle for power.

The shift in perspective by the news media had an effect on politics that bolstered a transformation of party engagement already fueled by the growing power of interest

groups and the expansion of government responsibilities into the lives of Americans.

Local party organizations, which vary in form across the country but are almost universally centered on the task of winning elections, were facing diminished importance as the political party weakened as the linkage between people and government. Whereas party officials on the local level had once played an integral role in helping members of the community with struggles such as finding jobs, dealing with the law, and navigating bureaucracy (Hetherington and Keefe 2007, 23), as well as in defining the popular stance on national issues, those roles were now being filled by expanded government and active interest groups. The party's role in campaigning, once central, was now quickly eclipsed by political consultants. And now, with an emphasis on drama in news reporting, the judgment of local party leaders was being eclipsed by “the wholesale politics of the television commercial” (Hetherington and Keefe 2007, 24) and the constant presence of news analysis:

Today, the most important players are the media, and what counts in a campaign is a candidate's image. As Peter Hart, a well-known pollster, observed, “A campaign is not played out anymore so much for people or voters; it's played out for the media.” Assisted by their advisers, candidates plan steadily for ways to gain media attention, to establish good relationships with print and broadcast media, and to generate favorable newspaper stories or acquire a few seconds of exposure on television. (Hetherington and Keefe 2007, 23-24)

The fading influence of local, community-based party politics on voter persuasion and the outcomes of elections (Hetherington and Keefe 2007, 23) further weakened the relevance of non-elites in the political process, even as formalized discourse became increasingly a series of conversations and conflicts between political elites only, delivered to the rest of the country in a top-down fashion.

Another consequence of the new emphasis on the reporter was the gradual erosion

of distanced objectivity, which for so long had been the hallmark of responsible journalism. In the decade and a half between the first TV newscasts and the end of the 1970s, the “wrap” of a report – the reporter's closing comment at the end of his segment – began as a technique only sometimes employed, but eventually became ubiquitous. In and of itself, this was not a significant development, but the wrap also became the prime opportunity for the reporter to interject a putdown or cynical remark, and by the end of the 1970s they were ten times as likely to wrap with an assertion than a fact (Patterson 2003, 68). The insertion of commentary into what was once primarily the recounting of facts served to put even more influence over the agenda and perspective of political discussion in the hands of the news media.

During the 1970s, the reporter's skeptical perspectives on government and politics and his somewhat inflated perception of the importance of the journalist as the central figure in the news report (Patterson 2003, 71) were only reinforced by the Watergate scandal and the Vietnam War. The relationship between the news media and the government officials and politicians shifted, from investigative and analytical to downright antagonistic:

Watergate became the prevailing myth of journalism. Reporters believed that the press had saved American democracy and that it had a continuing responsibility to protect the public from lying, manipulative politicians. ... Politicians would no longer be taken at their word. Reporting would be rooted in the assumption that officials could not be trusted. (Patterson 2003, 70)

Journalists had introduced three alterations to the structure of news: first, news reports were cast in a dramatic light, emphasizing the power struggle in politics and governance (with serious consequences for the nature of political engagement itself); second, the skepticism of the reporter was allowed to leak into his analyses; and third, interpretive journalism had become critical journalism, infusing explanatory

interpretation with the urgent need to expose the assumed wrongdoing of politicians. The result was the spread of pervasive negativity into the news (Patterson 2003, 79); ultimately, critical journalism would have a marginalizing effect on political discourse and the non-elite citizen's understanding of his democratic identity, concurrent with a similar trend in political engagement thanks to the dominance of experts in campaigning and the legislative process.

### **The Marginalizing Effect of Critical Journalism**

After its emergence during Watergate, critical journalism gradually devolved from being a means to an end (justice) to simply “an end in itself” (Patterson 2003, 75). With negativity seeped into every corner of the news – election cycles, Congress, the President, federal agencies – it was only a matter of time until public perceptions of government and democratic institutions followed. Negativity and skepticism in the news was certainly not the only factor in decreasing levels of confidence in American democracy, but many studies established that the links between the two were there (e.g., Miller, Goldenberg, and Erbring 1979). Connections between presidential candidates and their coverage on the news, presidential ratings and presidential reporting, and the correlation of bad press to low faith in Congress were all substantiated with evidence (Patterson 2003, 81). The increasingly negative coverage of politics in the United States had a significant role in weakening the connection citizens felt to their government and elected officials, and on their perceptions of their ability to effect change. In their 1979 “Type-Set Politics: Impact of Newspapers on Public Confidence,” Arthur Miller, Edie Goldenberg and Lutz Erbring found that critical reporting in newspapers has a significant effect on readers’ levels of

trust in their elected officials, and the more ominous long-term consequence of eroding confidence in the responsiveness of government institutions (Miller, Goldenberg, and Erbring 1979).

Further study demonstrated that the dramatic tone of news, in television news as well as radio and newspapers, was compounding to generate feelings of cynicism and negativity among voters (Patterson 2003, 81). Television news especially put an emphasis on conflict in politics and governance that produced high levels of cynicism (Miller, Goldenberg, and Lutz 1979). Such feelings inevitably have an impact on political participation, and “the mistrust [that negativity in the news] bred has contributed to the decline in [voter] turnout” (Patterson 2003, 82). Surveys from the 2000 presidential election revealed that individuals who were not registered to vote attributed that fact to disgust with politics 38% of the time – the most of all possible responses – and registered voters who did not participate in the elections attributed disgust 37% of the time (second on the list) (Patterson 2003, 82). In another survey, nearly half of respondents agreed that “most politicians are liars and crooks” – and those respondents were 13% less likely to vote than those who disagreed (Patterson 2003, 83). The ultimate effect of the negativity in critical journalism has been to deflate political participation.

Even worse, the cyclical nature of critical journalism's attack on politics has created a new generation of Americans with eroding interest in the news itself. Of young adults in the new millennium, “about half of them pay little or no attention, and no more than a fourth regularly attend to news coverage. ... [T]hey are only half as likely by adulthood to have acquired an interest in news” (Patterson 2003, 97). Such information, when combined with evidence of the decline in political participation, paints a disturbing

picture of the effect of critical journalism on democratic identity in the United States. It points to a declining sense of voice – the idea that one vote can lead to change, or the idea that entering into debate about the policies of the country will ultimately effect them. The news media have played only a partial role in creating this new marginalization, but it is not an insignificant one.

### **Conclusion**

In two hundred years the United States transitioned from colony to superpower, and helped to create the age of modern democracy along the way. Its development was marked by war, boom, bust and innovation – and public discourse evolved with every step. The agents of discourse, however, remained largely similar from generation to generation, and influence over the scope and focus of debate in this country stayed concentrated among elites such as news editors and politicians. Even as technology gave way to better printing presses, wider circulation, more rapid communication over long distances, and ultimately brought news reporting well beyond the printed word – all with the backdrop of even more dramatic change across the nation as a whole – the hierarchy of power that regulated political discourse remained small, centralized, and top-down.

When the boundaries of government were drastically redrawn during the New Deal, the gatekeepers grew in number – but the balance of power remained the same. Television and radio analysts, interest groups leaders and political consultants joined the ranks of those who could play the most central roles in discourse and engagement. The issues that were discussed were much more complex than in generations past, raising the stakes of debate and also demanding more specialized knowledge of those who



participated.

The shift to increased professionalization and specialization changed political culture but the flow remained one-way, and this paradigm persisted through to the present. Within the news media, “professional journalists are the gatekeepers who filter through the happenings of the world... exercising their professional news values at every stage” (Nip 2006, 216); and “the range of sources and perspectives permitted by professional news gatekeepers establishes the limits of the public sphere they manage” (Reese et al. 2007, 237). In many ways, this is an unavoidable system; as Paul Weaver succinctly explains it, “[t]he only way to insure that every citizen truly is the master of his own opinions is to ban *all* media. But such an imposition of ignorance would exercise its own tyranny” (Weaver 1972, 73). But the inevitability of subjectivity in formalized discourse does not mean its most negative consequences should be accepted or ignored. Unfortunately, the twentieth century saw an emergence of critical commentary within news reporting, and the lack of power held by non-elites meant there was little they could do to alter, or even recognize, the cynicism that rose to the fore.

Meanwhile, in legislative centers across the country, candidates, professional political operatives and interest group lobbyists were and are caught up in the ingrained tactics of political battle (and the news media eagerly sell it as such, to the masses and the elites equally). The decades-long dominance of professional political operatives within the processes that shape policy and the makeup of the government have solidified the top-down nature of discourse in the United States and crowded out those unpaid citizens seeking access.

The result, no matter the varying intentions of those involved, is a political system

largely devoid of meaningful or widespread two-way exchange between elite and non-elite Americans. In a nation built on the dream of shared deliberation and governance, few are heard, and those who speak can rarely afford to listen carefully. Marginalization and the apathy it breeds have become an urgent problem within a political system utterly reliant on the reasoned interaction of its varied and numerous participants.

Some things are changing in this new century. The introduction of the Internet into American life over the course of the last two decades has had incredible consequences for every single aspect of society, not least of all public discourse. Like other technological innovations before it, the Internet has been heralded as a messiah for democracy; it has also been labeled as a medium that would irrevocably fragment a nation that already had too many factions. In the next section, I will explore the impact the Internet has had on the balance of power within formalized political discourse and engagement, during its short lifetime as an increasingly widespread mode of communication in the United States.

## *Chapter Three*

### Internet Use in the United States

If discourse and engagement are the cornerstones of a healthy democracy, then it is surely access to both that keeps the foundation intact. Without access to consistent and accurate sources of information, or to people with whom opinions can be debated and shared, democratic institutions are bound to weaken or even fail. And, in the wake of increasingly powerful computing and communication technologies, the modes and standards of access have dramatically changed in the United States. At the center of this revolution has been the Internet.

In the span of the last decade, and especially with the opening of a new millennium, Internet use in the United States has grown from a fringe activity into a widespread and central part of many Americans' daily routines. Gaining access to people and information via the World Wide Web is no longer the domain of technologically savvy individuals; increasingly, it is a prerequisite for many aspects of professional, academic and personal life. For that reason, and to better inform the exploration of the Internet's role in formalized political discourse and engagement, it's important to paint an accurate picture of Internet access and use in the United States today.

#### **The Spread of Internet Use**

In September of 2000, a survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project showed that half of American adults did not have access to the Internet, representing a population of more than 94 million people (Lenhart et al. 2000, 5). Furthermore, 38% of Americans – fully 70 million people – did not use computers at all (Lenhart et al. 2000,

6). For the most part, this “digital divide” could be attributed to specific demographic characteristics. When Internet use was charted alongside income, the difference was startling: 78% of those earning at least \$75,000 every year had access to the Internet, while only 31% of Americans earning less than \$30,000 annually were connected (Lenhart et al. 2000, 6). Access along racial and ethnic lines also showed a lag in Internet use for minorities, but wealthier minority populations were as likely as wealthy white individuals to be online, confirming that “these racial and ethnic variances are explained by income” (Lenhart et al. 2000, 6). Age was also a “major factor” (Lenhart et al. 2000, 6) in predicting Internet access, with rates well over 50% for age groups ranging from 18 years old to 49 years old, but dropping off within the 50-59 subset (44%) and bottoming out for Americans over 60 years old (17%) (Lenhart et al. 2000, 5). Though the tech boom of the 1990s had gone a long way in demonstrating the potential of the new medium, these statistics show that a large and important segment of the United States was still offline.

Within the decade, the present state of Internet use in the United States has been dramatically altered, with the numbers telling a much different story than in 2000. In April of 2006, a Pew Internet & American Life Project survey showed that as of that March, approximately three-quarters of the American population – around 147 million people – were Internet users (Madden 2006, 3). They were still predictably segmented along the same demographic lines, but even within each group the growth was significant. When measured by income, the group with the most access – 91% – was still American households earning more than \$75,000 per year. However, Internet access among those with incomes less than \$30,000 climbed to over half. Perhaps most

importantly, the middle class in the United States – households earning between \$30,000 and \$75,000 annually, and the largest segment of the national population by a wide margin<sup>3</sup> – accounted for the largest expansion, with numbers drawing very close to access levels for the upper class (Madden 2006, 4).

Age is still an important determinant of Internet use, but less so than when the technology was truly brand new. Among non-adults (children ranging from 12 to 17 years old), an incredible 93% were using the Internet as of November 2006, and the younger generation of adults was not far behind. Eighty-eight percent of Americans aged 18-29 reported using the Internet, and 84% of those between the ages of 30 and 49 followed suit. There was still a drop-off when measuring the Internet use of older adults, but the number of wired Americans aged 50-64, 71%, was much higher than in 2000. Even Americans above the retirement threshold reported one-third of the time that they had joined the online community (Horrigan 2007b, 2).

The broad lesson of these data is that the solid majority of Americans has at least one point of access to the Internet, regardless of the other demographic categories into which they may be segmented. A 2007 report about Internet and communication technology (ICT) users states that the intensity of use varies for each individual, but with as many qualifying as “light users” as those who limited themselves to that categorization (Horrigan 2007b, 16), there can be little doubt that the Internet has quickly emerged as a key medium for a widening part of daily life. Indeed, the April 2006 Pew survey studied the impact of the Internet on four components of daily life – shopping, hobbies, job

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<sup>3</sup> All household income estimates taken from:

U.S. Census Bureau, “United States – Selected Economic Characteristics: 2006,” U.S. Census Bureau, [http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ADPTable?\\_bm=y&-geo\\_id=01000US&-qr\\_name=ACS\\_2006\\_EST\\_G00\\_DP3&-ds\\_name=ACS\\_2006\\_EST\\_G00\\_-&-lang=en&-sse=on](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ADPTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=01000US&-qr_name=ACS_2006_EST_G00_DP3&-ds_name=ACS_2006_EST_G00_-&-lang=en&-sse=on) (accessed March 2, 2008).

performance, and access to health care information – and found that a majority of Internet users reported improvement in all four areas (Madden 2006, 2). The individuals most frequently online reported the greatest improvement in all four (Horrigan 2007b, 2). Measured at the broadest, binary level (any Internet access at all), the Internet has proved within a short period of time to be a positive new medium across the country.

### **Home Broadband Access**

The adoption of broadband Internet at home is especially illustrative of the boom in Internet use within the first decade of the new century. The term “broadband” refers to telecommunication technology<sup>4</sup> that allows much higher rates of data transfer than does dial-up, or “narrowband,” Internet access (Gilroy and Kruger 2006, 2). With broadband Internet, “users can view video, make telephone calls, or download software and other data-rich files in a matter of seconds. In addition to offering speed, broadband access provides a continuous 'always on' connection (no need to 'dial-up') and a 'two-way' capability – that is, the ability to both receive (download) and transmit (upload) data at high speeds” (Gilroy and Kruger 2006, 2). As made clear by the mind-boggling number of websites on the Internet using unique and exciting tools that rely on high-bandwidth data transfer, broadband Internet “has the potential to transform the Internet” (Gilroy and Kruger 2006, 2) beyond its current state. Many aspects of this transformation – video broadcasting and large-scale social networking are just two examples – could have profound implications for American democracy. With this in mind, I chose to narrow my

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<sup>4</sup> Though all Internet connections that fall under the Federal Communications Commission's definition of “broadband” – at least 200 kilobits per second – are faster than dial-up connections, the current benchmark is “widely viewed as outdated” and experts from government, academia and the telecommunications industry have urged the FCC to update the definition (Flamm et al. 2007, 3).

focus from the broader question of Internet access to those Americans with home access to broadband Internet.

If the Internet was a fairly unused resource at the turn of this new century, broadband Internet access was essentially unheard of. In June of 2000, fewer than 5% of Americans had home broadband access (Horrigan 2006a, 2). Since then, however, home broadband access has grown rapidly and consistently: between 2002 and 2003 there was a 50% increase in home access, a 67% increase between 2003 and 2004, a 20% increase between 2004 and 2005, and a 40% increase between 2005 and 2006 (Horrigan 2006a, 1). The result of such expansion is that, as of March 2006, 42% of American adults had access to broadband Internet in their homes – a population of 84 million people (Horrigan 2006a, i).

There are two elements of the growth between March 2005 and March 2006 that indicate the increasing accessibility and equity of broadband Internet. The first is that many new users subscribed to broadband as their first link to the Internet, rather than transitioning from dial-up access to broadband; this represents “a striking change from the previous pattern of broadband adoption” (Horrigan 2006a, i) because it indicates that broadband Internet access is a better primary option for more Americans than it was previously. The other element of growth is the dramatic increase in home broadband access for those demographic groups that had the lower levels of access only a year earlier. Table 3.1 below lists the five demographic groups with the highest percentage increases in home broadband access between 2005 and 2006:

**Table 3.1: Largest Percentage Increases in Home Broadband Access, 2005-2006**

<b>Demographic Group</b>	<b>March 2005</b>	<b>March 2006</b>	<b>Increase</b>	<b>% Increase</b>
African-American	14% (18)	31% (t-15)	17	121%
No high school degree	10% (19)	17% (19)	7	70%
65+ years old	8% (20)	13% (20)	5	63%
\$30K-\$50K annual household income	27% (14)	43% (10)	16	59%
High school degree	20% (15)	31% (t-15)	11	55%

*Source:* Data adapted from Horrigan 2006a.

*Note:* The numbers in parentheses represent each demographic group's ranking for that year, in terms of home broadband access. All rankings are out of 20, where 20 is the group with the lowest access rates for that year. "t" indicates that the group had access rates equal to at least one other group in that year, and so shared the ranking.

Impressively, the segments of the American population which saw the largest percentage increase in broadband penetration are the demographic groups which represented the lowest access rates in March 2005. While it's true that only one of the five groups (households with \$30,000-\$50,000 annual income) was elevated to the national access level of 42%, the data still indicate that broadband Internet access in America is not being limited to a few select demographic groups, and that it "is no longer just the province of upper-income Americans" (Horrigan 2006a, 4). There are still many areas in the United States that lag behind in terms of broadband access, but home broadband Internet is becoming a reality for millions more Americans every year.

### **Lower Rural Broadband Penetration**

Of the demographic groups lagging furthest behind the rest of the country when it comes to home broadband connections, rural America is near the bottom of the list, both in terms of current broadband penetration and potential for service expansion. In 2000, 57% of Americans in rural communities did not have Internet access; a full 42% of the population did not use computers (Lenhart et al. 2000, 4). Growth in access was steady over the last few years – rural households connected to the Internet from home over a



broadband connection grew from 9% in 2003 (Horrigan and Murray 2006, 1) to 25% by March 2006 (Horrigan 2006a, 3) – but still paled in comparison to connection rates in cities and suburbs, where 44% and 46% of households had broadband Internet at home, respectively (Horrigan 2006a, 3). Even when the scope of broadband access is widened beyond just the home, 60 million people in the rural United States (21% of the population) are often underserved (Mitchell 2007, 46): “Half of all adult Americans who live in non-rural areas can get online with a fast connection at home or work. By contrast, just more than one-third of rural Americans can do this” (Horrigan and Murray 2006, 3). There is a digital divide that demarcates many different segments of society in the United States, but that gap nears its widest point where it separates rural Americans from the rest of the country.

Why is this so? Though many might assume otherwise, it is simply not the case that the divide exists due to differences in preference between rural and non-rural Americans. Those rural Americans who have high-speed Internet at home are nearly as likely as those with Internet access in urban and suburban areas to go online on a given day, or go online several times per day. A February 2006 Pew Internet & American Life Project survey found that on a typical day in December of 2005, urban and suburban users were found to average 2.2 online activities, and that rural Internet users averaged 1.9 activities (Horrigan and Murray 2006, 5). When measuring frequency of online use, there was no statistically significant difference between the habits of rural and non-rural users (Horrigan and Murray, 6).

The urban-rural digital divide is partly explained by the lower home penetration levels for broadband Internet outside of the cities and suburbs. Based on the findings of

Pew's February 2006 survey, it may be the most important factor: “having a high-speed connection at home is the single largest explanatory factor behind intensity of online use – an effect that has grown between 2002 and 2005” (Horrigan and Murray 2006, 5). And, geographically speaking, it makes sense that the rural communities in the United States would have the most barriers to broadband access when compared to more developed areas in the country. In a May 2006 study, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported the following:

Most importantly, companies contemplating the deployment of broadband infrastructure consider both the cost to deploy and operate a broadband network and the expected demand for broadband service. We found it is more costly to serve areas with low population density and rugged terrain with terrestrial facilities than it is to serve areas that are densely populated and have flat terrain. It also may be more costly to serve locations that are a significant distance from a major city. As such, these important factors have caused deployment to be less developed in more rural parts of the country. (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2006, 4)

In addition to development barriers, “rural Americans are, on average, older, less educated, and with lower incomes than people living in other parts of the United States – all factors associated with lower levels of online use” (Horrigan and Murray 2006, 3). These two problems combine to bring fewer opportunities for Internet access to a population that is less inclined than other groups to use the Internet, due to demographics rather than location. Rural broadband penetration is not a problem of rural preferences. Rather, it is an amalgam of other factors that weakens the market for infrastructure development in rural communities.

### **Explaining Lower Access Among Certain Groups**

On the national level, Internet use in the United States is approaching three-quarters of all American adults, and has climbed well above 90% for teenagers (Horrigan

2007b, 2). Yet some portions of the population – Americans who are older, less educated, living on below-average incomes, or part of a minority racial or ethnic group – remain behind the national Internet access averages despite recent accelerations in growth rates (Porter and Donthu 2006, 999). What are the reasons for this barrier? A 2006 study published in the *Journal of Business Research* suggests that cost of access may not be the only factor, or even the most important. Constance Porter's and Naveen Donthu's research about Internet use centered on the technology access model (TAM), which has been used to demonstrate that “perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are beliefs about a new technology that influence an individual's attitude toward and use of that technology” (Porter and Donthu 2006, 999). Porter and Donthu used the TAM to dissect consumer attitudes towards the Internet, and why certain people choose not to connect.

The results varied for each demographic group, but the overall theme was often the same: the perceived ease of use and the perceived usefulness of the Internet had strong negative effects on attitudes about, and use of, the Internet. For most groups, these factors actually had more influence on attitudes and actions than did perceived barriers to use such as the cost of Internet service (Porter and Donthu 2006, 1005). Elderly consumers, while recognizing the importance and applicability of the Internet to their lifestyles, “perceive the Internet as difficult to use and costly” (Porter and Donthu 2006, 1005). Individuals with lower levels of education share the same worries about the difficulties of learning to use Internet technology (Porter and Donthu 2006, 1001). Potential subscribers with lower annual incomes, on the other hand, “do not perceive the Internet as useful” (Porter and Donthu 2006, 1005). For those Americans who have not yet adopted the Internet as part of their lifestyles, the principle reason for this is most

often a lack of confidence in their abilities to learn, or in the Internet's applicability to their lives.

Porter and Donthu also concluded that “attitude toward Internet usage is significantly and positively correlated with Internet usage” (Porter and Donthu 2006, 1003); that is, increasing the exposure to the Internet of those Americans less inclined to use it would likely be an effective strategy in easing their concerns and bringing about higher levels of Internet use nationwide. With ICT adoption “far from the 'mature phase’” (Horrigan 2007b, 17) in the United States, according to John Horrigan – 49% of Americans are “light users” at best, and 15% don't use ICT at all (Horrigan 2007b, 16) – there would be justification and benefit to fueling efforts aimed at introducing light users of Internet technology to the many ways that it can help them (Horrigan 2007b, 17).

### **Philosophies and Approaches to Widening Accessibility**

It has been demonstrated that attitudes toward the Internet and propensity to use it are primarily affected by access and exposure, and not by cost or preferences unique to specific demographic groups. Based on this, access to the Internet should be widened; this is especially true for broadband Internet, which increases user output (Horrigan 2007a, 1) and “is critical to the health of our economy and social life” (Flamm et al. 2007, 4). Indeed, both of the last two presidential administrations have been in complete agreement about the goal of universal Internet access in the United States (Martin and Robinson 2007, 2). It is in discussions regarding the means to accomplish that end where the disagreements in policy emerge.

Under President Clinton, policy-makers “saw government intervention as

necessary for the diffusion of the Internet to all social and economic groups, a commitment reflected in frequent government publications about the digital divide” (Martin and Robinson 2007, 2). In the next decade, President Bush advocated the same goal – “to have universal and affordable broadband available in the United States by 2007” (Flamm et al. 2007, 2) – but rather than develop the infrastructure via government intervention, his administration “has been equally committed to the idea that market forces could propel the rapid diffusion of the Internet along all economic groups” (Martin and Robinson 2007, 2). The reality of the 1990s and the first decade of this new century is that it has taken government initiative as well as private entrepreneurship to bring broadband infrastructure to its current level in the United States. It will certainly require as much cooperation in the years to come – perhaps much more – if a shared vision of universal access is to be realized.

### *The 2006 GAO Study of Broadband Deployment*

#### *Infrastructure Expansion Through Private Enterprise*

There are many factors brought under consideration by a private company looking to deploy broadband infrastructure to a given area. The most important factor is the high cost of building and operating broadband, no matter the location. With profitable investments in mind, Internet service providers (ISPs) carefully weigh several components of a cost-benefit analysis when determining a region's potential for broadband deployment. Many parts of the equation boil down to simple questions of geography and population. Population density – the number of residents per square mile –

is “a critical determinant of companies' deployment decisions” (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2006, 19). Because of the increased distances between potential customers in a low density (and often rural) area, it is more expensive to build broadband infrastructure there, compared to infrastructure costs in high density areas such as urban centers. It is not all too surprising, then, that population density is the cost factor most often cited in the deployment decision-making process, and that urban areas in the United States are 9% more likely to have broadband service available than rural areas (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2006, 19).

In the same vein, the terrain of an area under consideration can be an important limiting factor. In especially hilly or mountainous regions, it can be difficult for service providers to bring in the necessary equipment for construction, making it very difficult to build broadband infrastructure. For ISPs using “line-of-sight” technologies like towers, antennas and satellites, rugged terrain can block communication and give the area extremely low potential for development (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2006, 19). Backhaul, or the transmission of data from a company's centralized “aggregation point” through the “backbone” service provider and on to individual consumers like households and businesses, is another important cost factor reported by providers. Thanks to the high costs of backhaul for rural locations far from the large cities where the aggregation points are located – in Alaska backhaul must be routed via satellite, which is even more expensive to set up and operate – remote areas in the country often appear even less appealing to providers (however, GAO analysis found that increased backhaul was not an indicator of lower broadband availability) (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2006, 20).

Several demand-side considerations can limit deployment decisions. Especially important in rural areas is the notion of aggregating demand in order to have the largest possible group of customers lined up for broadband subscriptions (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2006, 20). An “anchor tenant” – an organization large enough to singlehandedly help defray much of the ISP's costs – can often prove crucial to aggregation efforts. Providers generally target large businesses or federally-funded entities like schools, health clinics and government agencies to serve as anchor tenants (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2006, 20).

Providers will also consider the technological knowledge and familiarity of a potential deployment area, because demand is higher in those areas where potential customers already have experience with computers and broadband technology, and the benefits that both bring to daily life (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2006, 21). And, though providers do not tend to include it as a factor that affects decisions about an area, income levels have been shown to be linked with broadband availability: a 2004 study and analysis by the Government Accountability Office have both demonstrated that higher-income communities are more likely to have broadband service, and more likely to have competing providers in the area (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2006, 21).

The level of competition is in itself a factor that goes into an ISP's decision-making process. New providers will often avoid building out to areas where multiple companies already provide broadband access, instead focusing on lower-served areas where there is a higher potential of gaining many customers (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2006 21). But when a new provider does bring competing

broadband packages to an area with other providers, the original companies are often driven to upgrade and improve their offerings in order to strengthen their control over their client base (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2006, 21). In both ways, the dynamic nature of market-driven broadband deployment has been an important reason behind the expanding accessibility in many parts of the United States.

### *Infrastructure Expansion Through Government Effort*

The deployment of broadband infrastructure in the United States has been a primarily private, market-driven process, but at all levels of government there have been complementary and beneficial initiatives to ensure growth to areas that alone may not have provided enough incentive to ISPs. Federal programs have been especially helpful in the expansion of broadband availability in rural parts of the country. Two programs under the administrative umbrella of the Department of Agriculture's Rural Utilities Service give financial assistance. The Rural Broadband Access Loan and Loan Guarantee program provides loans to entities seeking to deploy broadband infrastructure to certain rural communities, granting lower interest rates when the community being serviced has had no previous broadband access. The Community Connect Program provides grants (about \$9 million in 2005 and 2005) to organizations that build out infrastructure in unserved rural communities with fewer than 20,000 residents, stipulating that specific “community facilities” be provided with free service for two years (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2006, 24).

The Universal Service Fund (USF) provides funds to local telephone companies with customers in remote or rural areas; the USF was not created specifically for



broadband expansion but “has been very important for the upgrade of telecommunications networks and the provision of broadband services” (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2006, 24), and has also provided billions of dollars to schools and libraries “in support of Internet connectivity” (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2006, 24). The Information Age Appalachia program provides similar aid toward the development and improvement of telecommunications infrastructure, as well as to education, training and technology-sector job creation in Ohio, Kentucky and Virginia (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2006, 24-25).

Below the federal level, state-run programs such as ConnectKentucky have brought about significant improvement in broadband accessibility (as well as benefited from federal funding), and state governments often play a critical role in efforts focusing on certain regions or communities within the state. ConnectKentucky focuses its efforts on educating the public about broadband and on improving the market for broadband deployment by working to increase demand (especially in rural areas) and decreasing regulation on deployment (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2006, 25). Other programs, such as Virginia's Regional Backbone Initiative, bring better broadband services to an area as part of broader efforts to change the economic foundation of the region (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2006, 25). Importantly, the GAO found that state taxation of Internet access does not have any statistically significant effect on the deployment of infrastructure (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2006, 21), disputing those who may argue that such acts on the part of state governments could disrupt market-driven expansion of access.

Many local and community efforts focus on indirect tactics such as aggregating

demand, but there are also ways in which local governments can have a direct impact on broadband accessibility, for better and for worse. Simple barriers such as restrictions on access to rights-of-way on roads, telephone and electrical poles, and towers (for wireless technology) can limit deployment of infrastructure on the local level (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2006, 25-26). The video-franchising process is an area of regulation that has had mixed results for broadband accessibility. In cities and towns that use a franchising system, companies that wish to provide video services like cable television must obtain a franchise agreement from the local government; for ISPs that use cable technology to package television and Internet, this can lead to delays in deployment due to the extra time and money required to navigate the process. However, video-franchising has also boosted access in those communities where the regulation required the franchised company to provide infrastructure to all parts of the service area, regardless of income (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2006, 26).

The most direct strategy of government participation in broadband service occurs in those municipalities where the government acts as the providers of broadband to its residents, both deploying the infrastructure and providing the service. Sometimes the motivation behind this decision is to bring broadband to people who do not have any private options to choose from; other officials view broadband as a public utility like water or sanitation and defend the right of government to provide it regardless of the presence of private providers in the area (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2006, 26-27). Where and with what level of commitment this policy occurs throughout the country obviously depends on the political philosophies of a given city or town.

Many community leaders and local officials have led successful efforts to

aggregate demand in their area in order to make their town – generally in a rural area – more attractive to service providers as an area for broadband deployment. By forming a coalition between schools, hospitals, businesses and residents, a local community can lure an ISP with the guarantee that a large block of demand will establish a stable customer base as soon as the infrastructure is built. ConnectKentucky, and Berkshire Connect in Massachusetts, are prime examples of how such coalitions have brought broadband development to previously underserved areas. In both cases, the cooperation and assistance of state government officials were underscored as crucial to success (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2006, 27-28).

## *Chapter Four*

### The Internet as a Forum for Political Discourse

Two hundred years did little to change the underlying distribution of control over formalized political discourse in the United States. Despite massive changes in technology, economics and the social makeup of the nation, the decision-making power remained disproportionately concentrated in the hands of political elites who were responsible for gathering and publishing content in the form of print and broadcast news. The root cause for such an imbalance was largely the limitations of existing technology, which restricted exchanges in the mass media to top-down, one-way interactions requiring centralized supervision at all stages.

The emergence and expansion of the Internet in the United States within the last two decades has had a significant and impressive effect on the conventional balance of power in the reporting and analysis of news. The massive, interconnected and two-way nature of the new medium has – for the first time in American history – opened the door to increased participation by non-elites in political discourse, and challenged the ability of an elite few to almost unilaterally dictate its focus. These positive changes have been accompanied by equally negative ones, as elites and non-elites alike rush to adjust and capitalize on a transitioning environment. Furthermore, much of the potential of the Internet remains hypothetical and unrealized, and optimism about the future of political discourse must be tempered. Yet an analysis of the changes that have already occurred illustrate an impressive equalization of influence – with more likely to follow.

## **Accessing Political News Online**

As a resource for gathering and reading political news, the Internet has experienced a rapid ascendance within the relatively short period of time since its first step toward widespread use. In 2000, 30 million Americans found political news online (Horrigan, Garrett, and Resnick 2004, 2) – a segment of the country approaching 10% of the national population. During the 2000 presidential election, the television was far and away the most important source of campaign news, with 86% of respondents to a Pew Internet & American Life survey mentioning it as one of two primary news sources. Newspapers were the second most mentioned source, with 36% including them in their top two; the Internet, on the other hand, garnered only 7% (Horrigan, Garrett, and Resnick 2004, 5). During the 2002 midterm elections, 11 million Americans – no more than 4% of the population<sup>5</sup>, and only 13% of Internet users – reported finding political news online in the typical day (Horrigan 2006b, 1). This was not an insignificant number of people, but it did not come close to approaching the relevant statistics for other communications media.

Within only a few short years, the Internet had gained an impressive boost in importance and users. In a 2004 Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, 63 million Americans reported using the Internet to find political news, a figure doubled in size from only four years earlier (Horrigan, Garrett, and Resnick 2004, 2). In a typical day, 21 million went online for campaign news and information (Horrigan 2006b, 1). Included in the study was a survey of the two primary sources of campaign news; the Internet was mentioned 15% of the time, doubling its frequency from 2000. Television was still the

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<sup>5</sup> All U.S. population statistics were collected from the U.S. Census Bureau estimates: U.S. Census Bureau, “Annual Population Estimates 2000 to 2007,” U.S. Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/popest/states/NST-ann-est.html> (accessed January 25, 2008).

most often mentioned of the many different technologies, but at 78% of respondents, it had seen an eight point decline in four years. Newspapers maintained a steady second place, climbing slightly from 36% in 2000 to 38% in 2004 (Horrigan, Garrett, and Resnick 2004, vi).

Respondents using broadband Internet connections painted a much different picture. Those Americans reported using the television less frequently than the general population – 72% mentioned it as a primary source of campaign news – and indicated that the Internet was nearly as important a source as the newspaper: 35% listed the newspaper as one of two primary sources and fully 31% of respondents put the Internet in the top two (Horrigan, Garrett, and Resnick 2004, 5). The 2004 data clearly illustrated the growing influence and mainstream recognition of the Internet as a news-gathering tool. The figures for broadband users demonstrated the importance of broadband Internet in encouraging the use of the Internet for political purposes, and foreshadowed that the Internet would soon be a more central source.

Within the last two political cycles – the midterm elections of 2006 and the ongoing presidential campaigning for the 2008 election – the Internet only expanded further into American culture and the news process. By August of 2006, 26 million Americans were using the Internet in a typical day to learn about political news and the progress of the midterms (Horrigan 2006b, 1). This represented a growth of two and a half times the segment of Americans that used the Internet on a daily basis for tracking politics in the 2002 midterm elections, and a doubling of the portion of the American population, from approximately 4% to almost 9%. The numbers grew even more impressively in the year that followed the midterm elections. A 2008 publication from the

Pew Research Center for the People & the Press reported that by December of 2007, 24% of Americans were learning news about the presidential campaigns via the Internet (Kohut et al. 2008, 1). Even more startling was the fact that 60% of Americans reported getting “most of their news” about politics from television sources (Kohut et al. 2008, 4):

Compared with the 2000 campaign, far fewer Americans now say they regularly learn about the campaign from local TV news (down eight points), nightly network news (down 13 points) and daily newspapers (down nine points). Cable news networks are up modestly since 2000, but have shown no growth since the 2004 campaign. By contrast, the proportion of Americans who say they regularly learn about the campaign from the internet has more than doubled since 2000. (Kohut et al. 2008, 1)

Television still constitutes the most widespread medium for the reporting of political news in the country. Yet as the Internet has gained more and more traction as a unique and multi-faceted source of information, more traditional communications media are beginning to weaken.

### **Early Worries About Internet Discourse**

The rise to prominence of Internet news reporting has provoked worries in many sectors of American society. Even when the Internet was no more than a fringe technology, experts and commentators on its use speculated that it would serve to filter information and reinforce previously held beliefs, rather than widen exposure and present conflicting arguments. In 1997, Marshall Van Alstyne and Erik Brynjolfsson co-authored a paper entitled “Electronic Communities: Global Village or Cyberbalkans?” Coining the term “cyberbalkanization,” Alstyne and Brynjolfsson worried that the Internet could fragment groups according to their philosophies or preferences:

It is also possible that improving communications access through emerging technology will fragment society and balkanize interactions. In particular, we focus on the potential balkanization of preferences, including social, intellectual

and economic affiliations, analogous to geographic regions. Just as separation in physical space, or basic balkanization, can divide geographic groups, we find that separation in virtual space, or "cyberbalkanization" can divide special interest groups. In certain cases, the latter can be more fragmented. (Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson 1997, 3)

Recognizing that "the Internet has enormous potential to elevate the nature of human interaction," they nonetheless argued that the vast amounts of information and perspectives available in the "global community" of the Internet could lead an individual to choose his or her neighbors – those "with whom he or she can meaningfully interact" – "based on criteria other than geography ... such as common interests, status, economic class, academic discipline, or ethnic group. The result can easily be a greater balkanization along dimensions which matter far more than geography" (Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson 1997, 4-5). Thus, even if the Internet could dramatically expand the number of people with whom a person can come into contact, "as long as human information processing capabilities are bounded," (Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson 1997, 5) it might result in people choosing to associate only with those who share their own views.

Cass Sunstein echoed these fears in his 2001 *Republic.com*. Considering the potential of the Internet to lead to the balkanization of ideology described by Alstyne and Brynjolfsson, he emphasized "the risks posed by any situation in which thousands or perhaps millions or even tens of millions of people are mainly listening to louder echoes of their own voices" (Sunstein 2001, 16). Sunstein further emphasized the importance of the unplanned exposure to information that Americans experience when they learn about the news from intermediaries such as newspapers and television broadcasts.

When you read a city newspaper or national magazine, your eyes will come across a number of articles that you would not have selected in advance. If you are like most people, you will read some of those articles. Perhaps you did not



know that you might have an interest in minimum wage legislation, or Somalia, or the latest developments in the Middle East; but a story might catch your attention. ... Perhaps you will be persuaded on one point or another, or informed whether or not you are persuaded. ... At the very least, you will have learned what many of your fellow citizens think and why they think it. (Sunstein 2001, 34-35)

Sunstein predicted that the isolation of differing perspectives from one another could seriously damage the processes of discourse and consensus-building that lead to action and solutions in our society: “If diverse groups are seeing and hearing quite different points of view, or focusing on quite different topics, mutual understanding might be difficult, and it might be increasingly hard for people to solve problems that society faces together” (Sunstein 2001, 61).

Concerns accumulated throughout the first decade of this new century – and continue to do so – that the Internet could be a medium with the potential to create such a polarized and irreconcilable atmosphere. Indeed, the last few decades have already given way to a far more polarized and vicious political culture in the United States, and many feared the Internet could add to it, undermining efforts at finding common ground across the nation (Horrigan, Garrett, and Resnick 2004, 2). The role of the Internet specifically in formalized political discourse was called into question by John Horrigan, Kelly Garrett and Paul Resnick: “Do people gravitate to information that supports their ideological preferences, and avoid information that challenges their beliefs? And if they do have such preferences, do the available news sources make it easy to get one-sided coverage? If the answers to both these questions are yes, the result will be what researchers have called 'selective exposure'” (Horrigan, Garrett, and Resnick 2004, 1). Developments that stretched and challenged the traditional formula of news reporting – with political blogs at the forefront – have led many to wonder if reasoned and balanced dialogue could give

way to a vast network of self-contained “echo chambers” (Reese et al. 2007, 240). The engine of democratic progress is negotiation and compromise; what might happen to our democracy if the Internet ultimately allowed the connections between the many parts of our political spectrum to be severed?

### **The Internet Facilitates Increased Exposure to the News**

The body of research related to the role of the Internet in political discourse and news-gathering is still taking shape today, because of the short period of time experts have had to gather data. Still, there is already evidence to suggest that many of the fears of cyberbalkanization are unfounded. In fact, the opposite may be true. Horrigan, Garrett and Resnick argue that in the last several years, “[a]t a time when political deliberation seems extremely partisan and when people may be tempted to ignore arguments at odds with their views, internet users are not insulating themselves in information echo chambers. Instead, they are exposed to more political arguments than non-users” (Horrigan, Garrett, and Resnick 2004, i-ii). Their 2004 study based on the data gathered by the Pew Internet & American Life Project indicated that Internet users – and, at least somewhat, broadband users over dial-up users – were inclined to seek out news that did not simply confirm their own predetermined convictions. Sixty-nine percent of broadband users preferred objective news (that is, news sources that “don’t have a political point of view”), compared to 54% of non-Internet users.

Perhaps more importantly, broadband users were as inclined to seek out news sources that challenged their political points of view as those that supported them (18% for both types); non-Internet users had a greater preference for news sources that share

their perspectives (28% vs. 19%) (Horrigan, Garrett, and Resnick 2004, 7). Part of these results can be explained by the fact that Internet users have a higher level of interest in politics than the average American. However, when the data about news preferences were compared with non-Internet using individuals with similar levels of political interest, the pattern held up (Horrigan, Garrett, and Resnick 2004, ii). The Internet appeared to be allowing people the opportunity to broaden their exposure and perspectives.

Even without considering political slant, Internet users are likely to find their news via a more diverse mix of media than non-Internet users. In the same Pew survey, respondents were asked to indicate how many news sources they used on a daily basis, out of a possible five listed (television, newspapers, radio, magazines and email/web). Broadband users reported an average of three different sources on a typical day, while dial-up users reported 2.7 and non-Internet users reported 1.7 sources (Horrigan, Garrett, and Resnick 2004, 4). Furthermore, the survey indicated that the incorporation of the Internet into one's news-gathering habits did not preclude the continued use of traditional sources. Those Internet users who reported going online daily to find news were 90% likely to also learn the news from newspapers or television. A comprehensive 99% of those who ever sought news on the Internet reported the same tendencies. Even among those who used the Internet to seek out alternative news sites, 92% also used the site of a mainstream, major news organization (Horrigan, Garrett, and Resnick 2004, 9).

The different news websites visited by online news-gatherers also tend to be fairly diverse. Fifty-nine percent of Internet users accessed news from a major news organization's website (Horrigan, Garrett, and Resnick 2004, vii). A 2007 Pew Research Center for the People & the Press survey of Americans finding campaign news on the

Internet revealed that out of the three most-visited news sites – those run by MSNBC (26%), CNN (23%) and Yahoo! News (22%) – two corresponded to a major television news outlet (Kohut et al. 2008, 2). The 2004 Pew Internet & American Life Project study found that nearly one fifth of Internet users learned about current events from the site of an international news organization such as the BBC or al Jazeera. More than one tenth of Internet users accessed an “alternative” news source such as AlterNet.org or NewsMax.com (Horrigan, Garrett, and Resnick 2004, vii). The percentages consistently rise when only broadband users are considered.

All the data gathered firmly back up the idea that “internet users, especially those with high-speed connections, are not organizing their searches to avoid arguments that would conflict with their views” (Horrigan, Garrett, and Resnick 2004, vii). Instead, Internet users are actively enriching and diversifying their daily intake of news – a habit that can only strengthen political discourse.

There are many websites online today that demonstrate the unique potential of the Internet to serve discourse, and allay Cass Sunstein's fears that the unplanned exposure Americans gain from reading newspapers and watching television news could be diminished by new technology. News aggregators – websites that gather news from many sources, based on different formulas – are one prominent example. Google News (accessible at [news.google.com](http://news.google.com)) is an aggregator run by the wildly successful corporation Google, as one facet of its online search engine. At all times, stories from over 4,500 English-language news sources (other supported languages include Arabic, Chinese, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Hindi, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Norwegian,

Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Swedish<sup>6</sup>) are gathered by the Google News service, and published on a central page for anyone to access. Using computer-powered algorithms, stories are ranked – based partly on “how often and on what sites a story appears online”<sup>7</sup> – and sorted into categories, including Top Stories, World, U.S., Business, Sports, Entertainment, Health, and Science/Technology. The many articles dealing with the same event are grouped under a single headline, with links to all of the different news organizations that published a story<sup>8</sup>.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Google News service is the complete automation of the process. Instead of publishing stories on the Google News page through a series of inherently subjective decisions about relevance and target audiences, the allocation of space on the Google News “front page” is based on a number of measurable factors, including the frequency of its appearance on many different news sites; “Google News has no human editors selecting stories or deciding which ones deserve top placement”<sup>9</sup>. Users of Google News, therefore, are immediately exposed to a vast array of news from around the world, describing many of the most important daily occurrences as soon as the articles are made available online (which is to say, very frequently).

Furthermore, unlike traditional media, which can limit an individual to consuming information from the sources he knows, Google News allows its users to learn about a story from whatever perspectives are available. In January of 2008, a non-Internet user

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<sup>6</sup> Google News, “About Google News,” Google, [http://news.google.com/intl/en\\_us/about\\_google\\_news.html](http://news.google.com/intl/en_us/about_google_news.html) (accessed December 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Google News, “Google News,” Google, <http://news.google.com> (accessed December 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Google News, “About Google News,” Google, [http://news.google.com/intl/en\\_us/about\\_google\\_news.html](http://news.google.com/intl/en_us/about_google_news.html) (accessed December 2007).

may have learned about the ongoing political turmoil in Kenya through the news sources he has traditionally trusted on a daily basis, such as *The New York Times* (delivered daily to his home) and the BBC (through his cable television subscription). His neighbor, on the other hand, accessing Google News with her computer, could instantly read the online articles published by both organizations (as well as access in-site, non-print-based materials such as audio and video segments); learn about local opinion on events from articles published by the *Daily Nation* in Kenya; find commentary from South African observers writing for *The Times*; and read international coverage by organizations such as Al Jazeera and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Such unprecedented, instantaneous access – to any news organization in the world with an Internet publication – illustrates the incredible potential of the Internet to heighten awareness and explains the tendency of Internet users to take advantage of their new tools.

The unprecedented amounts of news and information to be found on the Internet also increase the ability of non-elites to take the power to define their sources of news into their own hands. Previous communications media limited an individual to the information given to him or to what was readily available from sources such as libraries. Furthermore, the information presented was largely isolated from other sources; by contrast, many sources online can, and often are, linked to one another via hyperlinks. As a result, learning and engaging in discourse on the Internet breaks down ingrained hierarchies of control and permits the user to define the experience.

### **Making and Discussing News from the Bottom-Up**

In the 1930s and 1940s, the news industry began to undergo a shift in structure

and philosophy, which ultimately brought greatly increased measures of specialization, commentary and critical perspective into the reporting of news. The results of that shift were complicated and numerous, and it is difficult to untangle the knots of cause and effect that have accumulated over the last half-century, but there can be no doubt that those changes played an important role in the creation of the current atmosphere of marginalization, apathy and cynicism that plagues American politics today. The Internet is by no means a cure-all for our discursive malaise, but even in the span of one decade, signs have begun to emerge that indicate many Internet-based developments hold the potential to bring great benefit to the reporting of news and the flow of information in our society.

At its most basic level, the Internet is not a one-way medium of communication like the newspaper, radio or television. Instead, the Internet allows two-way, back-and-forth exchanges to form between its millions of users, an implication that is truly revolutionary in scope. As Hans Klein wrote in his 1999 article, “Toqueville in Cyberspace”:

The Internet provides a new means for realizing forums. This is a development of historic significance, for there has been practically no innovation in many-to-many communication in over two thousand years. The meeting hall used for today’s town meeting, citizens group, or Congressional committee differs little from the forum used by Greek citizens in classical times. The Internet changes that, making possible many-to-many communication without the use of a physical meeting hall. (Klein 1999, 213)

Not many people can yet say (with much authority) if our four thousand year-old habits of association are really being turned on their head by the Internet. But the developments that have already occurred regarding user-generated content – that is, contributions by Internet users to the existing commentary and debate – do demonstrate that Internet tools foster exchanges and hierarchies of control that differ from what

existed before them.

### *Decentralized Influence in the Blogosphere*

Blogs (short for “web logs”) are probably one of the most notable and well-known Internet-based phenomena to have worked their way into public discourse and news reporting. Blogs can take many forms and by no means do they all deal with current events or issues of controversy: a 2006 Pew Internet & American Life Project survey of bloggers revealed that the largest segment of blogs were those dealing with the blogger's (author's) “life and experiences” (Lenhart and Fox 2006, ii). Sixty-five percent of the bloggers surveyed did not consider themselves journalists (Lenhart and Fox 2006, iii). More than half said they authored a blog primarily for their own benefit and not for the benefit of whatever readership they may attract (Lenhart and Fox 2006, 18). The total size of the “blogosphere,” or the network of blogs on the Internet, was well over 112 million separate blogs in December of 2007<sup>10</sup>; with readership in the United States, as of the 2006 survey, somewhere around 57 million – 37% of American Internet users (Lenhart and Fox 2006, i) – it makes sense that most bloggers are driven by personal motivation to make their postings, because readership is likely to be low for most.

Most authors are young (54% were under the age of 30) and white (60% of all bloggers) (Lenhart and Fox 2006, ii), but bloggers were evenly split by gender (Lenhart and Fox 2006, 2) and more likely to have a non-white ethnicity than the overall Internet-using population (Lenhart and Fox 2006, ii). Half of all bloggers lived in the suburbs, with another third in cities; only a little more than one tenth of bloggers were from the

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<sup>10</sup> Technorati, “Technorati: About Us,” Technorati, <http://www.technorati.com/about/> (accessed December 2007).



rural parts of the United States (Lenhart and Fox 2006, 2). Among respondents, 37% had a college degree, compared to 27% of American adults; 38% were “knowledge-based professional workers,” almost triple the 13% of the national population that fell into that category (Lenhart and Fox 2006, 23). Still, like the broader Internet-using population itself, bloggers and blog readers continue to resemble more and more the mosaic of different identities that make up the United States.

Among the equally varying content of blogs, those with a political focus constituted the second-largest portion of the blogosphere, with 11% of blogs falling into that category (Lenhart and Fox 2006, 9). These news-oriented blogs – defined by Stephen Reese, Lou Rutigliano, Kideuk Hyun and Jaekwan Jeong as “the online postings of comments by citizens, groups, and news professionals, outside of the normal venues provided by the mainstream news organizations” (Reese et al. 2007, 236) – are the ones that have garnered the most attention (especially in recent campaign cycles) and that are beginning to have an impact on the flow and discussion of in this country. Most of the readership for political blogs is concentrated among a small group of highly-trafficked, popular blogs – dozens, as opposed to hundreds or even thousands (Graf 2006, 7). These blogs form the core of a new network of citizens participating in a dynamic and fast-paced environment of discourse. The many different discussions that take place on political blogs are initiated by the posting of the blog's author or moderator, a process that at its core is not all that different from those used by newspaper editors or television news producers.

What makes a blog radically different from more traditional forums, however, is the level of contribution and exchange of ideas that can follow the original post. Most

blogs give readers the option to post a comment or response to a post. Not every reader capitalizes on this opportunity to join the discussion; in fact, the Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet (IPDI) found in 2006 that only one tenth of political blog readers reported posting comments “very often” while 30% “sometimes” did so (Graf 2006, 7). But those that do post on political blogs are able to discuss current events and important issues with fellow citizens in a way that was once far beyond their reach, and if blogs do not compel a majority to speak, they certainly do move nearly all to listen: “A huge proportion of daily readers say they read comments others post on the blog – 84% said they 'very often' or 'sometimes' read such comments” (Graf 2006, 7). For those who read them, political blogs provide a unique forum for debate among voices that likely would have otherwise merited little presence in traditional media.

It's not very surprising that bloggers are among the most active citizens in the country, both in terms of political habits and their propensity to reach out to others. The 2006 Pew survey found that a full 95% of bloggers read news online at least in general, and 71% did so on a daily basis; this compares favorably even with home broadband users, a group that often outperforms other demographics when it comes to Internet use (this is partly explained by the fact that more than three quarters of bloggers are home broadband users) (Lenhart and Fox 2006, 4). Bloggers tended to consume news from traditional media at the same rate as other Internet users, and have the same preferences for unbiased news as well as some news that challenged or reinforced their ideologies (Lenhart and Fox 2006, 5-6).

Daily blog readers are very involved in political activities and more likely to place themselves at one end of the political spectrum than other Americans (Graf 2006, 5); this

likely reflects a motivating factor for using blogs to express themselves, rather than a consequence of reading them. In the IPDI's 2006 survey, daily blog readers “were more likely to have contacted a politician, contacted the media, been a member of a group that tries to influence public policy and attended a political speech or rally” (Graf 2006, 6). They are more likely to donate money to political campaigns at every level of government, and “a large proportion of daily readers have also taken political action at the specific suggestion of a political blog, such as signing an online petition (63%) [or] e-mailing a public official (57%)” (Graft 2006, 7). Blog readers are also more likely to communicate their views to others: 84% reported forwarding political news stories, 75% had forwarded political e-mails, and 70% had forwarded links to blogs (Graf 2006, 7). Amanda Lenhart and Susannah Fox argue in their 2006 Pew study that bloggers in particular “are among the most enthusiastic communicators of the modern age, taking advantage of nearly every opportunity to communicate” (Lenhart and Fox 2006, 6). These data make it clear that, so far, the political blogosphere is populated largely by the most eager and active participants in the democratic process. Nonetheless, the impressive amount of attention that this relatively small group (only 9% of Americans reported reading a political blog on a daily basis in 2006 (Graf 2006, 3)) has attracted illustrates the noticeable and important effects blogs are having on American journalism.

The relationship between political blogs and the traditional news media is a complicated one. The popular image of this relationship is of conflict and competition, with the blogosphere serving “as some kind of counter-sphere competitor to the traditional news media” (Reese et al. 2007, 239) – a label with both positive and negative

connotations, depending on perspective. The reality of the situation today is much more blurred than either sentiment indicates, but certainly a main source of both excitement and resentment is the role blogs have played in the last decade to weaken the hierarchies of formalized political discourse and weaken its primarily top-down and one-way nature in the news media. The interactive nature of blogging has empowered citizens, according to Reese, Rutigliano, Hyun and Jeong in their 2007 article, “Mapping the Blogosphere:” “Where traditionally journalism was charged with monitoring and reflecting public expression, citizens can now hold those conversations among themselves” (Reese et al. 2007, 237). Throughout the history of American journalism, the decision-making process regarding content and tone was almost exclusively concentrated in the hands of the editor and his reporters: whether picking which stories to publish in the daily newspaper, what to send across the country on the wire, or how to frame the dramatic arc of a campaign segment on the evening news, the expression of discourse was determined by the professionals – making them political elites with considerable power – and disseminated to the public for consumption.

Now the balance is slowly equalizing. Where before there was no mass-media forum to allow unfiltered public discussion of events and issues, today “the blogosphere weaves together citizen and professional voices in a way that extends the public sphere beyond the boundaries policed by the traditional news media” (Reese et al. 2007, 257). It is a new tool to observe and record public sentiment that is inherently decentralized: an infinite series of town hall meetings that do not require a moderator, and with audiences unlimited by capacity or location. Traditional news media still play the central role in national discourse (and lay claim to a far larger audience), but “knowledge and authority

are no longer closely held by 'insider' gatekeepers – or centrally located and assigned a sovereign territory – but embedded in this larger instrumental network” (Reese et al. 2007, 259). And though political blogs do not yet command a significant portion of the national population, their ease of use and low barriers to creation and supervision (Reese et al. 2007, 239) distinguish them in today's world of editorial decisions and profit-motivated conglomeration:

Ultimately, [the blogosphere] has great potential in meeting the normative expectations we have of the public sphere: access that does not depend on economic resources, autonomy from both state and market forces, and ability of participants to communicate across professional, political, and geographic boundaries on the basis of reason. (Reese et al. 2007, 259)

The low-cost, empowering “connectivity” of the blogosphere differentiates it from the structuring of the websites of the professional news media, but these organizations have begun to “enhance their currency” by allowing their content to be used and linked to by blogs (Reese et al. 2007, 239). Many of the major news sites – *The New York Times*, CNN and the *Wall Street Journal* are three prominent examples – have created their own, in-site blogs, further “blurring the demarcation line where the 'professional' product ends” (Reese et al. 2007, 258) and making it even more difficult to define the relationship blogging has to traditional news reporting.

Some commentators, including Michael Keren in his 2006 book *Blogosphere: The New Political Arena*, lament these developments as “the cooptation of what has been seen as a blogging revolution by the mainstream media. Once a revolution is hailed by the forces it is out to destroy, it ceases to be a revolution” (Keren 2006, 143). It is true that many blog readers visit blogs as an alternative news source – looking particularly for “a wider range of viewpoints” and “more in-depth information” (Lenhart and Fox 2006, 5) – and that there is a great deal of “disdain for the mainstream media” (Graf 2006, 6)

expressed on political blogs.

Yet labeling blogs as “out to destroy” traditional media is inaccurate when, in reality, the blogosphere has actually served a complementary role in relation to traditional news media, “supplementing and interconnecting the work of professional journalists” (Reese et al. 2007, 239). Most political bloggers rely heavily on the efforts and information of professional journalists within the traditional news media: blog material sampled by Reese, Rutigliano, Hyun and Jeong in 2007 was comprised mostly of second-hand reporting, with general comments and analysis forming 38.5% and 60.5%, respectively. Only 1% of all the content examined was first-hand observation (Reese et al. 2007, 247-248). Furthermore, nearly half (47.6%) of the links contained in the surveyed blogs directed the reader to content from the professional news media, much more than the 33.5% of references that linked to another blog (Reese et al. 2007, 249). Finally, 84.2% of links within blog posts were straightforward references, unaccompanied by supportive or derogatory comments (Reese et al. 2007, 252). From this information, it is very difficult to defend the notion that political blogs are undermining the importance of traditional news articles. The much more accurate conclusion to be drawn is that “bloggers, for the most part, simply engage the facts and information carried in news accounts, accepting them at face value and using them to form their own arguments, reinforce views, and challenge opponents” (Reese et al. 2007, 257) – in much the same way that anyone might use what he learns from the news to strengthen his position in a debate with another person.

In fact, bloggers rely in many ways on the institutions of the news media as well as the output of its individual reporters. Bloggers, after all, are not paid or compensated

for their efforts (only 8% reported actual income from their blog postings in the 2006 Pew survey (Lenhart and Fox 2006, 15)) – a fact that discourages most from regular posting (Lenhart and Fox 2006, 12) and the “grittier, less glamorous aspects of news work” such as tracking down leads, talking to sources and attending government meetings, according to Wilson Lowrey (Lowrey 2006, 483). Many journalists derive important benefits from this side of their profession, because the reliable and consistent interactions between the members of the traditional news media and government institutions allow stronger connections with sources and more trust to be shared (Lowrey 2006, 483-484). It's unlikely that, in the absence of experienced professional journalists to do the legwork behind each and every article they produce, bloggers would be able to step in as independent observers of the political process. Citizens of the blogosphere are as reliant on a strong press as all Americans are.

In some ways the opposite is true, too: the traditional news media have a growing reliance on bloggers as new technology takes the country into uncharted territory. The Internet has been a powerful force in the spread and availability of news, a process that has helped create a better-informed citizenry but a weakened press because the economic infrastructure for print and broadcast news is rapidly changing. By prompting blog readers to read articles and editorials they might not otherwise have known about, “[blogs] provide an important secondary market for [the professional news media's] market. ... [A] good news story may receive a far wider circulation and recognition for the journalist who wrote it than ever before” (Reese et al. 2007, 257). And far from undermining the authority of major news organizations, the heavy reliance on source material in political blogs has actually strengthened “journalists' claims over the tasks of

gathering news and ensuring accuracy” (Lowrey 2006, 493). In the same way that radio and television news relied heavily on the traditions of the media that preceded them, political blogs could not exist without the foundation of conventional journalism. That dependence has helped mainstream news reporting, seemingly much more than it has harmed it.

The blogosphere may yet have even more curative effects on traditional media. Increasingly, blogging has exposed the fact that “journalists tend to drop stories prematurely and move to fresh topics” (Lowrey 2006, 494). Through blogs, “citizens can hold... conversations among themselves and, in a new twist, amplify the 'conversations' among journalists” (Reese et al. 2007, 237), perhaps permitting a longer shelf life for debates over specific issues. As our nation faces a disturbing array of complicated questions, lengthier debates and more careful consideration of expert analysis and different perspectives would certainly strengthen public discourse and policy. The increased power of non-elite Americans to determine the length and depth of debates epitomizes the unprecedented shifts being provoked by the Internet.

Political polarization is another deepening problem in the United States. In the blogosphere, Reese, Rutigliano, Hyun and Jeong concluded that “there is perhaps a predictable pattern of an echo-chamber, with the liberal blogs being more likely to link to liberal sites” and conservative blogs to conservative sites (Reese et al. 2007, 252-256), but the echo-chamber effect is “not strong by any means” and is “consistent with the polarization observed in the mass market for books and increasingly on the Foxification of 24-hour news channels” (Reese et al. 2007, 258). However, 48.8% of sites linked to within surveyed blog posts were “non-partisan” or “non-political” (Reese et al. 2007,



256), and many of the blogs were difficult to classify along the liberal and conservative spectrum (Reese et al. 2007, 258).

Thus, although there is a partial echo-chamber, these blogs serve to direct readers to a broader base of news and commentary that is difficult to pigeonhole ideologically. If including the 'other political', we might conclude that some 60 percent of links are not to one's own political pole. ... In fact, much of what these blogs do is push readers to other information that they would not have otherwise read. (Reese et al. 2007, 256-257)

The blogosphere is equipped to create a network of knowledge and opinion that could greatly diversify the range of perspectives the average American ingests on a typical day. More importantly, it offers a platform to anyone with Internet access for voicing his or her opinion and engaging with others. This is a powerful shift from the highly structured, centrally regulated system of discourse that predated it.

### *Democratic Participation with Wikis*

Wikis emerged as a popular online tool out of their origination as tools for documenting design and development processes for coding and other technical projects (Sunstein 2006, 149-150). The wiki is a fairly simple concept: it is “a website that allows any user to add material and to edit and delete what previous users have done” (Sunstein 2006, 148). In this way, they are inherently democratic, precisely because (in theory) anyone that uses and contributes to a wiki has the same editing and authoring rights as every other user over the content (Sunstein 2006, 149). Such open access naturally leads to worries about the vulnerability of a wiki to tampering and destruction, but, as Cass Sunstein discusses in *Infotopia*, the reality of wikis is that such vandalism generally does not occur, simply because “most people really want the process to work” (Sunstein 2006, 149). In the last several years, wikis have played important roles in political discourse,

illustrated well by one example pertaining to the human rights debate surrounding Guantánomo Bay:

In 2003, the American Civil Liberties Union received thousands of pages of documents relating to the treatment of detainees being held at Guantánomo Bay in Cuba. The ACLU was unable to review the documents simply because of the huge number of pages and the small number of people available to read them. But in 2005, a group of volunteers used wiki software to expedite the process; as a result, people can divide up their readings as they choose, and they can post their findings in a common space. The group was spurred into action by the influential liberal blog, Daily Kos. At the wiki called dKosopedia, volunteers have been reading and summarizing the massive material. (Sunstein 2006, 6)

The effort at the heart of this story is certainly nothing new – cooperative efforts have always been crucial to human progress and democratic processes especially. Yet several barriers were overcome in this example that demonstrate the potential of the Internet and the new tools that have emerged since its creation. Without the Internet, any action by the ACLU to coordinate the division and summary of the massive set of documents would have required a serious devotion of time and personnel simply to set up schedules and communicate individually with the participants. By centralizing the coordination on an Internet wiki, a large portion of this effort was taken care of because it allowed readers to approach and interact with the project completely on their own terms. An article published by *Wired* in June of 2005 compared the effort with volunteer work that helped to break the Nazi code ciphers during World War II, but highlighted the “groundbreaking” aspects of the ACLU's project:

They're "changing the way leverage is applied," [Clay] Shirky said. "The historical dilemma of democracies is that it's very hard to get large groups organized. So, paradoxically, the more widely distributed an opinion is, the harder it is to turn its adherents into an interest group." ...

"They are lowering the costs to get large groups coordinated," he said. And by "providing a template and instructions for a good post, they are not just undertaking this effort, but also providing a master template for other groups who want to do similar things." (Terdiman 2005)

According to both the *Wired* article and the central page on the ACLU's wiki that monitors the progress of the project<sup>11</sup>, success has been limited due in part to the difficulty of the material and the high ratio of documents to reviewers. Still, the project represents an intriguing template for what could be a unique and effective tool for collaborative projects whose participants face significant geographical barriers to direct contact, or whose scope presents serious burdens to anyone attempting to directly oversee the project via traditional methods. Networks of citizens from across the country could use wikis to dissect and discuss documents such as Congressional legislation without centralized leadership or a common meeting place.

Wikipedia is the most well-known – for better and for worse – of the many non-technical wikis that have been created. In the same way that all wikis function, Wikipedia is “a free, web-based encyclopedia that attempts to take advantage of the information held by its tens of thousands of contributors, who add to and edit the encyclopedia” (Sunstein 2006, 149-150). As of January 2008, the number of contributors on Wikipedia far exceeded Sunstein's description, with 6,208,590 users<sup>12</sup>. In the English language encyclopedia alone, there are well over two million separate articles; the entire Wikipedia “collection” includes over nine million articles, in 250 languages<sup>13</sup>. In terms of sheer content, Wikipedia must surely be counted among one of the largest repositories of human knowledge ever.

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<sup>11</sup> dKosopedia, “FOIA: Detention Practices Project – dKosopedia,” dKosopedia, [http://dkosopedia.com/wiki/FOIA:Detention\\_Practices\\_Project](http://dkosopedia.com/wiki/FOIA:Detention_Practices_Project) (accessed January 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Wikipedia, “Statistics – Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia,” Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special:Statistics> (accessed January 16, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Wikipedia, “Wikipedia: About – Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia,” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:About> (accessed January 16, 2008).

Editing on Wikipedia is as straightforward as the process on any wiki. As a well-known and highly-trafficked source of information, the explanation of editing puts an added emphasis on the crucial role responsibility and accuracy play in determining the success of Wikipedia:

Anyone is welcome to add information, cross-references or citations, as long as they do so within Wikipedia's editing policies and to an appropriate standard. For example, if you add information to an article, be sure to include your references, as unreferenced facts are subject to removal. There is no need to worry about accidentally damaging Wikipedia when adding or improving information, as other editors are always around to advise or correct obvious errors, and Wikipedia's software, known as MediaWiki, is carefully designed to allow easy reversal of editorial mistakes.<sup>14</sup>

Editing on Wikipedia is the dynamic and consistent aspect of the project that makes it a constantly evolving product. Between July of 2002 and January of 2008, a total of 193,995,483 edits were made – an average of 16.84 edits per page in the span of just five years<sup>15</sup>. This includes edits by unregistered users<sup>16</sup>, which means that the total number of editors could be well over six million, but the reality of Wikipedia is that, despite the huge number of contributors to the English-language Wikipedia, more than half of the edits were made by 524 individuals, less than one percent of the users; “[t]he most active 2 percent of users, that is, fewer than fifteen hundred people, have done almost three-quarters of all edits” (Sunstein 2006, 152). This is one of Wikipedia's drawbacks, and calls into question whether it is truly democratic in nature, but it does not serve as a valid criticism of the democratic structures built into Wikipedia. Indeed, because of a “Discussion” forum built into each article, “every entry in the encyclopedia can be used as a deliberative space – and many entries are so used” (Sunstein 2006, 152).

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Wikipedia, “Statistics – Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia,” Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special:Statistics> (accessed January 16, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

Much like the participation within the blogosphere, current practical realities do not diminish the important structural equality of editorial control built into Wikipedia.

Despite its reputation to the contrary, Wikipedia is in fact surprisingly functional and successful in terms of size, response time to new topics, quality and accuracy (Sunstein 2006, 151). Numbers are at the heart of the reason why: “large numbers of knowledgeable people are willing to participate in creating Wikipedia, and whatever errors they make usually receive rapid correction, simply because so many minds are involved. ... Wikipedia works because those who know the truth, or something close to it, are usually more numerous and more committed than those who believe in a falsehood” (Sunstein 2006, 151-4). In addition to giving all users full editing abilities, Wikipedia also allows anyone to flag any article he suspects to be ideologically skewed with the statement, “The neutrality of this article is disputed” (Sunstein 2006, 155). Anyone can join in the discussion of the article and how it might be revised to represent a more objective take. As of February of 2007, there were over four thousand such flagged articles in the English-language Wikipedia<sup>17</sup> – a sizeable number, but less than one fifth of one percent of the total number of articles available.

Like anything that exists online, wikis are a new tool, and the success and viability of the examples of their application are by no means proven. Still, the exciting nature of wikis like dKosopedia or Wikipedia lies in their structure and potential – these projects, and others like them, have the seeds of a truly democratic process within them. The powers and responsibilities of editors and supervisors are no longer constrained or centralized to a select few; instead, the course of a project is determined by as many

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<sup>17</sup> Wikipedia, “Category: NPOV Disputes – Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia,” Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:NPOV\\_Disputes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:NPOV_Disputes) (accessed January 16, 2008).

people as choose to participate. Even more, the voice and perspective of each individual involved is necessarily as important as the next. In theory at least, this is true democracy. Time will tell if wikis can translate this potential into a practical reality.

### *Differing Levels of Involvement: Participatory and Citizen Journalism*

In her 2006 article, “Exploring the Second Phase of Public Journalism,” Joyce Nip traces the lineage of participatory journalism and citizen journalism, two aspects of online news that have, like blogs, begun to change the one-way flow of news from professional journalists to citizen consumers. Both are the heirs to public journalism, a movement that emerged in the 1990s within the news industry to face concerns “about a double disconnect – between journalists/news organizations and the citizenry/communities, and between the American people and public life” (Nip 2006, 213). The goal of public journalism is to give citizens a more significant role in the news process by making the final product – for example, a newspaper or television broadcast – the result of a conversation between the professional journalists and the community. Until recently, attempts in different media (including the Internet) to realize the aim of public journalism had fallen short of truly bringing individual citizens into the news process in ways that empower the community and “alter the dominant role of the professional journalist” (Nip 2006, 221). But new technology on the Internet and in traditional media is beginning to draw amateurs and professionals much closer together in their contributions to news.

Though many published works, academic and otherwise, do not distinguish between the terms “participatory journalism” and “citizen journalism,” Nip insists that

there are important differences between the two. Participatory journalism describes the collaboration of both professional journalists and citizens: “news users [generate] content, more or less independently of the professionals, whereas the professionals generate some other content, and also produce, publish and market the whole news product” (Nip 2006, 217). Under this model, non-professional journalists – that is, anyone who wants to contribute to the process of documenting and analyzing current events and issues – are given a role in the creation of a final product, under the supervision, and within the framework, of professional editors (Nip 2006, 217). With its flexible and dynamic two-way structure, “the Internet is the main platform for the practice of interactive and participatory journalism” (Nip 2006, 230) and offers the most (but not all) examples of participatory journalism in action.

One of its largest manifestations, frequently mentioned in relevant literature (Reese et al. 2007; Nip 2006; Bowman and Willis 2003), is OhMyNews.com in South Korea. OhMyNews launched in 2000 and combined a small professional staff of editors and reporters with a much larger network of amateur journalists who submitted their stories for publication and, sometimes, a small payment (Kahney 2003). In 2002, OhMyNews played a significant role in the election of President Roh Moo Hyun (Ihlwan 2006); by 2003, stories were being submitted by more than 26,000 non-professional journalists and read by as many as two million readers daily (Bowman and Willis 2003, 7). The professional staff grew to 90 by 2006, with approximately 44,000 citizens writing articles of their own (Ihlwan 2006).

The business prospects of OhMyNews remain unclear, and it has yet to succeed at the same scale outside of South Korea (Ihlwan 2006), but the online model of

participatory journalism is being employed by both alternative and mainstream news organizations around the world. MSNBC's "Citizen Journalist" webpage calls for videos and photographs from any "witness to a big event" as well as for stories written by citizens affected by current events (such as Hurricane Katrina and rising oil prices)<sup>18</sup>. In the aftermath of the Columbia space shuttle disaster, *The Dallas Morning News* called for photographs and stories; in advance of worldwide protests against the Iraq war, the BBC requested photographs from participants and observers (Bowman and Willis 2003, 8). The Google News aggregator includes blog postings alongside the mainstream news stories in order to widen the range of perspectives presented to its users (Good 2006, 70). The ubiquity of cameras in today's society – inexpensive digital cameras and cellphone cameras give a huge number of Americans the ability to document the world around them, wherever they are – has made participatory journalism an empowering way for citizens to help journalists describe daily events in pictures as well as words.

Video, on the other hand, is nearly as ubiquitous as photography and often even more powerful in its ability to transport the viewer to the scene of the news. But, while streaming video has become a central part of the Internet's appeal (79% of broadband users watched video on the Internet in 2006 (Holahan 2007)), Internet technology does not yet support the widespread ability to watch live video online (Gore 2007, 264). For that reason, Al Gore predicts in his 2007 book *The Assault on Reason* that, "[f]or the remainder of this decade, it is television delivered over cable and satellite that will almost certainly continue to be the dominant medium of communication in America's democracy" (Gore 2007, 264).

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<sup>18</sup> MSNBC TV, "Citizen Journalist – msnbc.com," MSNBC, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6639760/> (accessed January 16, 2008).



This drove Gore to found CurrentTV, an example of participatory journalism on television that allows viewers to submit video segments of their own to be broadcast as part of a daily mix of submitted videos (or “pods”) and professionally-made segments. In 2007, 30% of CurrentTV's content was viewer-generated, covering “everything from cutting-edge bands and dogsled races, to African villagers struggling with HIV/AIDs and dispatches from soldiers serving in Iraq” (McGirt 2007). The innovative and highly successful business model of CurrentTV (McGirt 2007) reinforces it as one of the leaders within the traditional news media, as an emphasis is placed on adapting to new standards and expectations regarding news in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Nip distinguishes citizen journalism from participatory journalism as a new process wherein “the people are responsible for gathering content, visioning, producing and publishing the news product... In this model, professionals are not involved at all (unless in the capacity of citizens but not as paid employees)” (Nip 2006, 218). Citizen journalism alters the process and standards of news reporting such that the traditional hierarchy of control is truly broken down. Instead of following a centralized editing process overseen by professional journalists, citizen journalism projects are maintained through decentralized participation by citizens wishing to play a role in the spread of news and information.

News-oriented blogs represent one manifestation of citizen journalism, as individual authors contribute commentary and occasionally original news to the body of discourse surrounding current events and issues. Wikinews is another project of citizen journalism: in the same way that Wikipedia exists to allow anyone in the world to add

their knowledge to an ever-growing collection, Wikinews gives any Internet user the ability to write and publish a news story.

As discussed earlier, however, blog authors rely heavily on professional journalists for content and source material; in the same way, Wikinews does feature original reporting (articles written using source material gathered first-hand by the author), but most of the articles featured on a daily basis on Wikinews rely on news stories published on traditional news sites. So far, the progress of citizen journalists has been slowed by the experience and resources required to accurately and comprehensively pursue a story, and Nip predicts “their value is more likely to lie in being specialist reporters and commentators” when an individual's expertise can complement the contributions of traditional news media (Nip 2006, 230-231). But the very emergence of such a process – the decentralized organization of which could likely not exist without the technology of the Internet – effectively illustrates the power of the Internet to challenge century-old paradigms.

## **Conclusion**

It is tempting, especially with a global phenomenon that has been as provocative as the Internet, to resort to hyperbole when analyzing the remarkable changes that have occurred within such a short time frame. The use of Internet-based technology has demonstrated with exciting clarity the empowerment that is possible when active and interested citizens find new ways to express themselves. The decentralized autonomy of blogging, as well as the synergy and collective output of wikis, represent a unique outlet for Americans anywhere to gather around issues important to them. Furthermore,

research within the last decade has proven fairly conclusively that even using the Internet simply to learn or listen expands one's exposure to new perspectives and greater amounts of information.

The sum of these developments is a shift in the way news is reported and digested. Before, individuals consumed the news given them in a top-down, centralized system of distribution. This arrangement limited the range of opinions and viewpoints that could make their way into formalized political discourse. Combined with other factors, the elite-dominated hierarchy of control over political discussion in the United States stifled some forms of expression and contributed to feelings of marginalization among non-elite Americans.

Today there is a visible change, though it is currently limited to a small group of politically active, technologically savvy individuals who have jumped to capitalize on Internet tools. Their success, however, at increasing the strength of their voices in political discourse, represents encouraging portents of what could follow: a larger distribution, and decentralization, of influence over the focus and agenda of political discourse in both national and local communities. The unique ability of the Internet to facilitate massive, two-way exchanges only adds to the opportunity to fundamentally redefine political discourse in the United States, for the first time in its history.

Of course, political discourse is only one facet of democracy. The crucial follow-up to debate is action, and there are many ways by which political engagement has manifested itself online. In Chapter 5, I will explore the effects of Internet technology on the evolution of the operations of political campaigns, interest groups and their many non-elite participants.

## *Chapter Five*

### Online Engagement in Political Campaigns and Interest Groups

The same entrenched inequalities that have been a part of formalized political discourse for two centuries are also embedded in many outlets of political engagement in the United States. Much of the power to direct the focus and operation of political organizations is centralized among political elites. Over the course of the twentieth century, the numbers of these elites grew in size, as professional consultants and interest group lobbyists became increasingly important. Non-elites grew more and more frustrated and marginalized as they found less space for their viewpoints at the table.

The Internet is helping non-elites to claim some of that influence for their own, but there have been benefits for the traditional power-holders, too. Those political campaigns and interest groups that have recognized the opportunity inherent in online technology have been the first to innovate. They have also been the organizations to gain credibility and success through non-traditional tactics. The result of the last decade has thus been two-fold: the balance of power is equalizing for non-elites within the realm of political engagement – in the same ways that formalized political discourse has evolved – and savvy elites are recognizing the shift and adopting many of the tools for their own.

### **Shifting Power Dynamics in Political Campaigns**

#### *1992-2002: The Evolution of Early Online Campaigning*

When the Internet first became a viable medium for political campaigns in the early 1990s, it was not a break from the rich history of political campaigning in the

United States, but rather another adaptation in a long line of adaptations made by innovative campaigners seeking an edge over their opponents. As Kirsten Foot and Steven Schneider detail in *Web Campaigning*, staff within the 1992 Clinton presidential campaign were among the first to tap into it, using discussion groups and email in a limited fashion to coordinate campaign strategy and planning among their high-ranking supporters (Foot and Schneider 2006, 8). This use of the infant technology was not much more than a new weapon for the top-down, “war room” style campaign – reserved for the elite members of the campaign hierarchy and used to direct the efforts of the larger group of campaign workers on the ground.

As Internet access began to spread to the wider public midway through the 1990s (Chadwick 2007, 287), so too did the proliferation of new Internet tools, perhaps none as important as the National Center for Supercomputing Application's Mosaic, one of the first browser applications to be developed. Mosaic 2.0 – the release of which began in January of 1994<sup>19</sup> – was the first major browser to use the Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) coding standard, which allowed the integration of graphics with text on websites (Foot and Schneider 2006, 8). With this advance, some campaigns began to build websites, though the content on these early sites were little more than electronic brochures that reproduced the traditional, printed content used in much larger volumes (Foot and Schneider 2006, 8-9). The campaigns of 1996 and 1998 saw progressively higher numbers of candidates using websites as an added part of their campaigns – half of Senate candidates and 15% of House candidates in 1996 (Foot and Schneider 2006, 8), increasing to 72% of Senate candidates and 35% of House candidates two years later

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<sup>19</sup> Brian Wilson, “Browser History: Mosaic,” blooberry.com, <http://www.blooberry.com/~bloo/indexdot/history/mosaic.htm> (accessed February 13, 2008).

(Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007, 426) – but for all the proliferation, there was only “marginal change” in the approach to Internet campaigning (Foot and Schneider 2006, 9). Indeed, for the wide majority of candidates that went online in these campaigns, “merely being on the Web, or demonstrating knowledge of the Web, was Web campaigning” (Foot and Schneider 2006, 9). The vast majority of American households had yet to tap into the online world, and so the experience and interest necessary to prompt substantial investment in Internet technology had surely not yet materialized. At this point, use of the Internet by campaigns had yet to challenge the top-down hierarchy of control.

That all changed with the onset of the 2000 presidential campaign. With the tech boom of the 1990s at its peak, it was seen as the first Internet campaign, and the medium was heralded in much the same way as television during the 1960 presidential campaign (Foot and Schneider 2006, 9). Over half of House candidates, and three-quarters of Senate candidates launched websites and many of the presidential candidates poured significant funds and strategy into theirs (Foot and Schneider 2006, 9-10). The viewership for these websites varied widely, but James Druckman, Martin Kifer and Michael Parkin estimated in “The Technological Development of Congressional Candidate Web Sites” that some Senate campaign sites received as many as 800,000 visitors during the campaign (and some as few as 1,000) (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007, 426). This is certainly an indication of the growing political attraction of the Internet, as more and more Americans saw the Internet playing an important role in their daily lives. More significant, however, was the way in which certain campaigns were able to tap into the budding potential of the Internet to begin a process that would redefine expectations and standards in politics. Senator John McCain certainly raised the most

eyebrows when, in the span of just one week after his victory in the New Hampshire primary, he raised \$2.2 million online and recruited 26,000 volunteers. John Mintz of *The Washington Post* declared that McCain was “[rewriting] the rules for political campaigning in the cyber age” (Mintz 2000).

By the time of the 2002 midterms, the tools that had emerged two years earlier in the presidential race had been co-opted by candidates running for office in the Senate, House of Representatives and governorships across the country (Foot and Schneider 2006, 10). Websites focusing primarily on elections had been developed throughout the last half of the 1990s, “by a wide range of actors – such as political parties, the Federal Election Commission and other government bodies, news organizations, civic and advocacy groups, educational institutions, and individual citizens” (Foot and Schneider 2006, 7), so the interest in campaign websites and the tools available was increasing. The most popular Senate websites during the midterms attracted over 1.5 million voters (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007, 426), and it was expected by many that the Internet would become a central medium during the 2004 campaign. Thanks in large part to the surprising campaign of Howard Dean, governor of Vermont, this did happen, but in ways that could hardly have been predicted, and that would continue to challenge existing political patterns through the present.

### *Campaigns’ Internet Tactics Since 2004*

The 2004 campaign season saw unprecedented use of the Internet: 68% of House candidates and 71% of Senate candidates (and 68% of gubernatorial candidates) brought their efforts online (Foot and Schneider 2006, 7); for the major-party candidates in the

running, the numbers were even higher (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007, 426). Indeed, with the majority of the country accessing the Internet, candidates today no longer face the question of whether to build a website – the need for one is largely a given and the decision-making process largely revolves around its construction: how it will look, who it will target, and what tools it will use to sway voters (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007, 426). The Internet is now seen essentially as the home for “an electronic headquarters” (Foot and Schneider 2006, 10), and within that headquarters the campaign can use tactics that fall into four categories: presentation, fundraising, message dissemination, and mobilization. In an examination of the impact of the Internet on political campaigns in the United States, three of the four areas (excluding presentation) must be analyzed from two perspectives. How do the campaigns capitalize on available technology, and how do voters using the Internet interact with the campaign?

#### *Expanded Presentation Opportunities*

The presentation of a campaign's website – that is, the look and feel of its design and the elements that are used – is where a campaign remains most closely tied to the electronic brochure format. However, constantly evolving technology and computing capacity have allowed website designers to move far beyond the limitations of the 1990s and to incorporate elements “that would be impossible with a brochure” (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007, 434). One of the most notable of these developments is the use of audio and video multimedia “to present information vibrantly” (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007, 427). The use of audio and video within the campaign website climbed from 30.2% and 57.6% in 2002 to 40.4% and 69.2% in 2004 in House and Senate campaigns,



respectively (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007, 433). In this era of candidate-centered, personality-driven politicking, multimedia clips give the candidates an opportunity to “personalize” information that is presented, and to “draw the audience's attention to the display and possibly to accentuate perceptions of the candidate's personal qualities” (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007, 427).

Considering the central role of the news media in bringing personality and identity to the forefront of campaigning, it is hardly surprising that the attention of journalists is also drawn to the aesthetics of campaign websites. In a *New York Times* article dissecting the design of Senators Barack Obama's and Hilary Clinton's 2008 presidential campaign websites, the differences in design choice were seen as “a clear blueprint of their personal style – perhaps even a window into their souls – through the Web sites they have created” (Cohen 2008). Design questions that have always been prevalent in the traditional media of print (the font, color and layout of a document) and broadcast (the sights and sounds of a clip) must be considered together as the campaign attempts to create a coherent product that bundles the strengths and weaknesses of both media together in one unit.

A website can also store information in a much more extensive and dynamic way than is possible with a printed brochure. Because the Internet is a global electronic network composed of millions of individual units, it is “virtually limitless” (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007, 427) in terms of storing and providing information. Candidates, then, have the ability to publish as much content as they want on their websites, including their biographies, issue stances, speeches, news stories and whatever else is deemed appropriate (while also avoiding the appearance of a cluttered website (Druckman, Kifer,

and Parkin 2007, 427)). This content can be constantly revised, updated and expanded by the campaign to keep pace with the unfolding chaos of the campaign. The constant addition of new photos and videos, as well as the now-typical publication of a campaign blog, allow voters geographically removed from a campaign to follow its progress beyond the coverage it's given by the news media.

Indeed, websites *must* be updated frequently if the campaign expects to attract voters back for repeat visits. In 2002 and 2004, “virtually all” Congressional candidates did take advantage of the capacity of the Internet and in 2004 most candidates were careful to keep updating and adding information as the campaign progressed (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007, 433). Furthermore, the use of hyperlinks that direct the user to external sites allows the presentation of even more information and can help boost engagement with visitors (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007, 428); in 2002 and 2004, nearly three-quarters of Congressional candidates used external links on their websites (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007, 433). External links must be carefully managed, however, because of the danger that they could bring the voter to sites not “entirely consistent with the candidate's message” (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007, 428). Subsequently, most links provided were “safe links” to voter registration sites and news specifically about the candidate, whereas “risky sites” such as the webpages of the party or presidential candidates were generally avoided (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007, 434).

These kinds of questions about the presentation and structuring of a campaign website do the most to preserve the top-down influence that has always been prevalent in politics. Decision-making power remains in the hands of political elites (often

professional consultants) within the centralized operations of the campaign staff, and is not dispersed outward into the hands of non-elite citizens involved with the campaign. This persistence of the status quo, however, is the exception rather than the rule when the effects of the Internet are considered.

### *Small-Scale Networking in Online Fundraising*

The campaign war chest is often the most closely-tracked aspects of a campaign, and money has become increasingly important to the American campaign, so it is no surprise that the role of the Internet in political fundraising has been front and center during the past decade. In a 2005 study, the Pew Internet & American Life Project called the Internet “an effective medium to raise large amounts of money in small donations from many people on a recurring basis” during the 2004 campaign cycle (Rainie, Cornfield, and Horrigan 2005, 1) – a combination of three of the most important factors in fundraising (how much, how many and how often) that has only increased the declarations that the Internet has revolutionized political culture in the United States. In his short-lived but remarkable candidacy, Dean raised \$20 million online, which constituted 40% of his total receipts (Rainie, Cornfield, and Horrigan 2005, 1). President Bush raised \$14 million during his re-election bid (5% of total receipts), and Senator John Kerry raised \$82 million (33%) (Rainie, Cornfield, and Horrigan 2005, 1). All in all, four million people gave money online, doubling the number from 2000 and quadrupling the number from the 2002 midterms (Rainie, Cornfield, and Horrigan 2005, iv). A 2006 study by the IPDI reported that in every age group besides the 65+ cohort, well above half of donors gave online, regardless of donation size; more than 80% of Americans

aged 18-34 (a group that will grow more important to candidates as they age with each election) gave online (Graf et al. 2006, 18). Combined with the effects of the 2002 Bipartisan Campaign Finance Reform Act (also known as McCain-Feingold), the astonishing amounts raised online contributed to a “watershed moment in political fundraising” (Graf et al. 2006, 3) that fueled the beacon of Internet politics.

Even part-way through the 2008 presidential campaign it's clear that the Internet has become even more important for fundraising. The Obama campaign reported raising 90% of the \$32 million they gathered in January of 2008 online; Clinton raised \$7.5 million online within the first week of February (Healy and Zeleny 2008). And the online phenomenon is not isolated, but rather connected to an increased focus on small donors. Because it only requires a credit/debit card and a few minutes in front of a computer, donating to a campaign is far easier (for both the user and the campaign) than traditional methods. This has made collecting small donations “so easy and efficient that campaigns have greater incentives to pursue small donations” (Graf et al. 2006, 17), and “[m]uch of [the] online money came in donations under \$200, an important development with implications for the perennial debate over the influence of big money on American politics” (Rainie, Cornfield, and Horrigan 2005, 1-2). As a result, the added emphasis on effectively gathering online donations and small donations is “closely related” (Graf et al. 2006, 17). As both the importance of the Internet and of small donors increase, it is necessary to examine recent developments in order to better understand how they are changing the fundraising equation.

## **The Growing Influence of Small Donors**

Small donors (those giving contributions equalling or less than \$200) have often been important sources of campaign funds in American politics, but traditionally they have been courted most by fringe candidates, while the major candidates have generally turned to large donors (Graf et al. 2006, 3). During Dean's presidential run in 2004, however, one of his many departures from convention was to raise a significant amount of money from small donors, much of which came to his campaign early in the primary race. Early money, which is crucial for campaigns to buy advertising and build a perception of strength, typically comes from large contributions: in 2003, 66% of donations to the major candidates were in amounts of \$1,000 or more (Graf et al. 2006, 4). Thus Dean's ability to build a considerable bankroll from small donations early in the campaign – and overall, he raised \$30.6 million in small donations, 60% of total receipts (Graf et al. 2006, 4) – was an important accomplishment that helped propel him to the position of early frontrunner.

The two nominees subsequently “shifted their own fundraising efforts” to put greater focus on courting small donors (Graf et al. 2006, 3). By the end of the general election in November of 2004, Kerry and Bush had both raised over \$79 million in small donations, more than 30% of the totals raised by both men (Graf et al. 2006, 4). The total amount of small donations raised by all presidential candidates in 2004 represented at least a tripling, and possibly a quadrupling, of the number of small donors involved in the 2000 presidential campaign (Graf et al. 2006, 5). During the 2008 Democratic primary race, the symbolic importance of small donors grew as a demonstration of the grassroots nature of a campaign. Obama trumpeted the fact that, in 2007, his campaign gathered

larger and larger portions of its total receipts from small donors each quarter (23% in the first quarter doubled to 47% by the fourth quarter), and ever-smaller average donation sizes (~\$900 in the first quarter, down to ~\$225 in the fourth quarter) (Healy and Zeleny 2008, graphic). Obama emphasized the difference in approach to fundraising between his campaign and Clinton's campaign:

“I think there’s no doubt that she has not generated the kind of grass-roots enthusiasm that we have,” Mr. Obama said. “It’s not for lack of trying. She’s got a former president actively fund raising for her, as well as people like Terry McAuliffe. But what we’ve done is created this base where people send \$25 checks, \$50 checks on an ongoing basis.” (Healy and Zeleny 2008)

The fact is that *all* donors to the presidential campaigns in 2004, large and small, constituted no more than 1.5% of the adult population in the United States (Graf et al. 2006, 5), and somewhere between five and ten percent of Americans donated to a federal candidate or campaign (Graf et al. 2006, 6). But, while small donors are certainly not much larger a segment of the population than large donors, they do outnumber them by a large proportion. Furthermore, while large donors are disproportionately male, older, wealthier and very highly-educated Americans (Graf et al. 2006, 11-12), small donors still “remain firmly part of the upper and upper middle classes in America... [but] people who give small contributions are more likely to look like they come from middle class households” (Graf et al. 2006, 13-14). Any shift toward larger and more important sources of small donations is thus certainly a step in the direction toward a more democratic fundraising process.

The attractiveness of a campaign philosophy that puts heavy emphasis on Internet fundraising is steadily growing, as more and more people go online and the generation of Americans raised with the computer comes of age politically. Through the Internet, the

process of soliciting contributions can be carried out “in a very engaging way. Contact can be highly personalized, so a request can be tied to an issue important to the prospective donor” (Graf et al. 2006, 17-18). The personal nature of online fundraising means that a deeper connection between the donor and the campaign is formed: online donors in 2004 were more likely than offline donors to say they would donate again in 2008, and much more likely to volunteer (Graf et al. 2006, 23). The Internet is a low-cost bridge to deeper political engagement for many voters, and contributing money online can often be the first step.

The implications of online contributing seem much more significant for voters. The IPDI found that it is “strongly related” to the initial act of finding information and news online (Graf et al. 2006, 29), and “the likelihood of a donor using the Internet for political information is not affected by how much money the household earns” (Graf et al. 2006, 29), so low income families that are connected to the Internet are more likely than those offline to become involved with politics, often financially so. Furthermore, by putting much of the choosing power in the hands of individuals who can seek out the campaign of their choice – rather than contact being initiated by a campaign, as it solicits money – online fundraising is much more of a bottom-up process than its predecessors. Online donors were considerably more likely than offline donors to have contributed without being asked, whether their donation was a small one (46% vs. 24%) or a large one (39% vs. 29%) (Graf et al. 2006, 18). In its report, the IPDI argued that “[i]f direct mail is akin to fundraisers chasing donors, then the Internet is akin to donors chasing fundraisers. In our interviews with donors, many said their first donation was unsolicited and made after they looked for information about candidates online. ... People looking to

make a contribution first look online” (Graf et al. 2006, 18). The Internet has increasingly become a domain where campaigns must rely on voters to come to them – a significant development, because it transfers more political capital to non-elites and forces campaigns to use more engaging and empowering techniques.

Campaigns that reach out for money through the Internet must similarly rely on small donors to build larger networks of influence, a practice that traditionally has been reserved for large donors. Through a process called bundling, large donors exert pressure on their friends, family and colleagues to follow their lead in contributing large sums of money to a candidate, and as such many bundlers are the driving forces behind hundreds of thousands of dollars that stream into a campaign's account (Graf et al. 2006, 5). The Internet is magnifying that effect among small donors, where it was previously far less likely to occur, “by giving small online donors greater opportunities to connect with others, find political information and perhaps be exposed to the social pressures to move them into the repeat donor class” (Graf et al. 2006, 19). Helped along by email (72% of small donors reported forwarding political email to others (Graf et al. 2006, 30), a habit that is key to spreading influence online (Graf and Darr 2004, 25)) and campaign websites that allow users to create a personal fundraising page, small donors are given the chance to build and join networks that motivate more consistent donating patterns as well as deepen the importance of their involvement.

Fundraising in American politics has historically revolved around the courting of deep pockets: wealthy donors, who can afford to contribute the maximum amount allowed, and the other wealthy donors who follow the lead of those within their networks. Large donors still play a crucial role, but as the 2008 presidential campaigns have



demonstrated, effective use of the Internet is beginning to counterbalance the disproportionate levels of influence held by elite donors. The Internet boosts the ability of small donors (traditionally holding little or no elite status in politics) to build networks of their own – bringing greater sums of money to a campaign, compelling more people to move beyond donations and volunteer their time, and bringing increased attention and respect to non-elite Americans at the same time. In this way, the explosion of small-money donations is only one indication that the true promise of the Internet lies in its facilitation of network building.

#### *Message Dissemination and Online Interaction*

The true political power of the Internet lies in the communication that is made possible by the immense, interconnected network of people going online. For that reason, much of the advances made by campaigns in regards to message dissemination during the last several years have been only partially visible on the websites themselves. In the 2004 campaign, extensive online databases of voters were used to coordinate highly targeted outreach to people on the individual level, and not just precinct block by precinct block (Rainie, Cornfield, and Horrigan 2005, 2). This kind of unprecedented precision has strengthened the “targeted marketing” (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007, 428) that has characterized modern campaigns; if a user inputs his or her personal information on a website form – such as where he or she lives or what his or her priorities are – the campaign can “send crafted messages designed for specific segments of the population” (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007, 428). The increased use of this process, known as personalization, from the 2002 midterms to the 2004 presidential campaign indicates that

politicians and their staff grew more comfortable with the technology “as it improved and became easier to use” (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007, 437).

Central to personalization is email, because it allows campaigns to craft targeted messages for many different audiences – the 2005 Pew Internet & American Life Project survey found that 14% of the national adult population received emails from “political actors” just in the period between Labor Day and Election Day of 2004 (Rainie, Cornfield, and Horrigan 2005, 5), and 7 million people signed up to receive email from a campaign during the 2004 elections (Rainie, Cornfield, and Horrigan 2005, v) – and further empowers the recipients to pass the message directly to others, differentiating it from many other media used for targeted marketing. Campaigns have made a “special effort” to encourage their supporters to spread political emails, prioritizing it within the email content itself and also making it an automated process on the campaign website (Graf et al. 2006, 30). Yet, as Joseph Graf and Carol Darr argue in “Political Influentials Online in the 2004 Presidential Campaign,” “the habit of forwarding email lies largely outside a campaign's control” (Graf and Darr 2004, 25). This new dynamic has played a significant role in the changing relationship between the campaign and the voters.

Many campaigns have found further success in message dissemination by tapping into existing online networks. Dean's presidential campaign was able to capitalize on its widespread support in the blogosphere, described by Andrew Chadwick in “Digital Network Repertoires and Organizational Hybridity”: bloggers “banded together to form the 'Dean Defense Force,' whose role was to send quick fire rebuttals to TV and newspaper editors accused of misleading coverage” (Chadwick 2007, 291). During the 2008 campaign cycle, staff members representing most of the candidates have used the

popular site YouTube to share video captured at events along the campaign trail, “uploading videos onto their YouTube channels sometimes by the hour. They feature interviews with random supporters on the street and snippets from speeches even as the candidates are still speaking” (Seelye 2008). These direct and indirect appeals to voters, facilitated by the Internet, have helped candidates to accumulate support (Seelye 2008) and to diminish the powerful ability the news media have to control how a campaign’s message is received.

Campaign organizations, and the political elites who run them, are not alone in benefiting from the expanded role of the Internet in message- and issue-oriented discourse – voters have also been empowered by an impressive array of tools that allow them to better inform themselves as they approach Election Day. The campaign may have a much greater ability to disseminate the candidate's stance on any important issue, but Internet users can conversely draw from a wide number of sources to check the information they are given against reality. During the 2004 campaign season, 34 million Americans – well over half of online political news consumers in that year – researched the position of at least one candidate on the important issues. Twenty million people looked up the voting records of candidates online, and 25 million used the Internet to verify the accuracy of a candidate's claim. Sixteen million researched the endorsements and ratings of different candidates, and 19 million watched video clips about the candidates or the election in general (Rainie, Cornfield, and Horrigan 2005, iv). Without the Internet, the ability of voters to gain easy access to the complete records and resources necessary to inform themselves – such as voting records or articles reporting a

candidate's stance on economic issues from several years ago – is greatly diminished from what the immediacy and convenience of the Internet allows. Americans are much more equipped today to decide for themselves whether the perspectives offered by elites in the news media and in politics mesh with their own.

Beyond the targeted marketing that is so attractive to a campaign, personalization permits each voter to make his or her exchange with the campaign much more meaningful on an individual basis. Campaigns that use personalization features on their websites give users the opportunity to specify what issues matter most to them and learn the most about the candidate's views on these issues (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007, 428). A customized platform strengthens “the persuasiveness of the candidate's message” (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007, 428) and also allows voters to define their relationship with the campaign on their own terms. Voters that rely too heavily on personalization run the risk of being “incompletely informed” about the candidate's position on other issues, and may lack a “coherent understanding of the candidate's overall goals and intentions” (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007, 428). It is the responsibility of each voter to build a complete understanding of each candidate's platform, and ultimately the Internet has done more to strengthen, rather than weaken, the ability to do so.

### *Decentralizing Control Over Mobilization*

The added precision that the Internet brought to message dissemination was also heavily used by campaigns in 2004 in mobilization: identifying active and enthusiastic supporters, “affording them opportunities to help the campaign, and making sure that

they registered and cast their ballots” (Rainie, Cornfield, and Horrigan 2005, 2). As in so many other facets of the campaign, it was the Dean presidential campaign that pioneered online mobilization techniques. Their innovative use of the Internet website Meetup.com, which facilitates the scheduling and organization of face-to-face group meetings, was a key factor in the huge wave of success and momentum that elevated Dean from fringe candidate to frontrunner in a matter of months. But unlike traditional campaign mobilization, the initial Meetup.com events were set up entirely outside the supervision of the centralized campaign organization. In an interview with *Wired* magazine, Dean explained the power this small online community of devoted Dean supporters had in fueling his early growth:

"We fell into this by accident," Dean admits. "I wish I could tell you we were smart enough to figure this out. But the community taught us. They seized the initiative through Meetup. They built our organization for us before we had an organization." (Wolf 2004)

Once his campaign realized the potency of Meetup.com, however, Dean's tech-savvy staffers were quick to partner with the company to play an organizing role in facilitating online voters' efforts to start local groups in support of his candidacy (Rivero 2004). The number of monthly Dean meetups grew from 11, in February of 2003, to over 800 by the fall, and the campaign transitioned from trying to have paid staffers oversee all the meeting arrangements to a decentralized, bottom-up infrastructure that diffused responsibility away from the campaign, and into the hands of engaged citizens; and eliminated the costs and delay of centralized planning (Wolf 2004). Ultimately, the use of the site peaked at one thousand Dean meetings in a single night, and over 180,000 people used Meetup.com to find other supporters in their area (Rivero 2004).

It is inaccurate in many ways to attribute the success of Dean's campaign on

Meetup.com to actions taken by the campaign itself. But thanks to the recognition by campaign elites like Joe Trippi, Dean's campaign manager, that the Internet was allowing people to organize themselves in a different fashion than had traditionally been possible, the Dean campaign used their official website and the attention paid them by the national media to fuel the use of the website. Later, the campaign built its own software that gave people the ability to host house parties in support of Dean; the Kerry and Bush campaigns did the same thing (Rainie, Cornfield, and Horrigan 2005, 2), and since then it has become even more widespread.

By the time of the 2008 presidential campaign, all the major candidates (in February 2008: Obama, Clinton, McCain and Governor Huckabee) built action centers within their official websites that, like Meetup.com, allowed supporters to start or join a local group; they also have the option to make phone calls from call sheets provided automatically by the campaign, become a fundraiser by encouraging others to donate (and track their progress on a personalized page), reach out to undecided voters with official talking points, host or attend an event in their area, and start a blog or personal page. None of the options provided requires direct contact with campaign officials; instead, the campaigns have opted to build “stupid networks” – defined by David Isenberg as a network that is “as simple as possible, with advanced functionality and intelligence moved out to its edges” (Wolf 2004) – that emulate and improve on the original template the Dean campaign laid out. This evolution in campaigning underlines the potential of the Internet to radically alter the balance of power within political engagement. By surrendering a portion of control to dedicated citizens across the country, recent political campaigns have actually gained from doing less.

The benefits of this approach to campaigning go beyond the tactical. By tapping into decentralized, “distributed trust” (Chadwick 2007, 291) networks such as the political blogosphere and the community of online individuals looking to meet face-to-face, Chadwick argues that the Dean campaign “served to galvanize existing supporters by giving the impression of a genuine grassroots campaign that differed from establishment party politics” (Chadwick 2007, 291) (in the same way that Obama has emphasized the “grass-roots” nature of his fundraising). During his 2004 presidential campaign, Kerry's website included an online forum that allowed users to engage one another in debate about any of the issues being discussed. The ability that this gave voters – they were not simply limited to reading about Kerry's stance on the issues, but rather could put forth their own opinions and engage with others – built “a perception of transparency and deliberation” and linked it to the wider discussion-based atmosphere of the blogosphere as “a node in a trusted network rather than a single authoritative source” (Chadwick 2007, 292).

The use of online forums within Congressional campaign websites did not increase much between 2002 and 2004 – remaining at about 10% for House candidates and climbing from 3.4% to 13.4% for Senate candidates (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007, 433) – probably because it is relatively new and unfamiliar technology, but the benefits to using them are clear. Druckman, Kifer and Parkin argue that the competitiveness of a race, and the corresponding preference of a campaign to control their message, is one of the most important reasons behind the low adoption rates of multimedia elements such as discussion forums (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007, 438). In his research, however, Chadwick argues that by allowing policy debate on his

website that could not be directly associated with his official platform, Kerry's website "achieved its purpose as a repertoire of transparency and deliberation... without jeopardizing the official policy stance" (Chadwick 2007, 292). Regardless of their philosophies or policy proposals, candidates such as Dean and Kerry who built an engaged online community around their campaign have been able to lay claim to a more open and democratic mandate than many others.

It's clear, then, that it is difficult to draw an acceptable line that demarcates the influence campaigns have on online mobilization and the role of voters in doing it themselves. Writing for *The New York Times*, Matt Bai argued that "[i]n the new and evolving online world, the greatest momentum goes not to the candidate with the most detailed plan for conquering the Web but to the candidate who surrenders his own image to the clicking masses" (Bai 2007). Along these lines, email has proven both important to a campaign's success and tricky to control; getting recipients to forward messages to others not on the list is always emphasized, but because the decision whether or not to do so lies completely in the hands of the recipient, email has become as much a tool for the non-elite masses as it has for the campaign. During the 2004 campaign, 43 million Americans (35% of Internet users at the time) used email to discuss politics (Rainie, Cornfield, and Horrigan 2005, ii). Fourteen percent of Americans used email to encourage others to vote – 7% for a certain candidate and the other 7% regardless of preference (Rainie, Cornfield, and Horrigan 2005, 5). Four million signed up online to volunteer for a campaign by helping to organize a rally, register voters, transport people to the polls on Election Day, or do other activities (Rainie, Cornfield, and Horrigan 2005,



v). Campaigns have continued to try to push the right buttons to provoke voters into this kind of behavior, but “these things can't really be orchestrated” (Bai 2007).

The bottom-up style approaches to mobilization that the Internet has strengthened are rapidly complementing the top-down tactics that have dominated in the past. The campaigns that can most effectively adapt to this paradigm shift will strengthen themselves, but the most impressive result of this development is the increased ability of non-elites to become an important and legitimate factor in American politics.

### *New Online Leaders*

In their 2004 “Political Influentials Online in the 2004 Presidential Campaign,” Joseph Graf and Carol Darr identified and discussed Online Political Citizens (OPCs) – Americans who are especially politically active online (Graf and Darr 2004, 2). These individuals were identified in surveys because of their propensity to visit the website of a candidate or political party, and to engage in at least two political actions such as donating online, using email for political causes, reading or discussing news online, and several other criteria (Graf and Darr 2004, 11-12). In the United States, approximately 7% of the population qualify as OPCs, a group that is disproportionately made up of wealthy, highly educated, white males (Graf and Darr 2004, 19); and estimated at between 8.6 and 21.5 million Americans (Graf and Darr 2004, 39).

What really distinguishes OPCs from others is the extremely high likelihood that they also fall into the category of “Influential,” a term coined by Ed Keller and Jon Berry in their book *The Influentials*: “opinion leaders and trendsetters with their friends and neighbors” (Graf and Darr 2004, 3). Influentials are highly important within their

community and as assets to a campaign, because of their power to influence others in the decision-making process. An impressive 69% of OPCs are Influentials, compared to 13% of Internet users and 10% of the general American public (Graf and Darr 2004, 3). The online realm of political action is densely populated with the Americans that play the central role in our self-governing society.

Online Political Citizens pay close attention to campaigns and display high levels of involvement in it. In the 2-3 months that preceded Graf's and Darr's survey, 46% of OPCs had donated to a candidate or political organization, a segment far larger than the 10% of the general public; they were also more likely to have donated than Influentials in the general public (Graf and Darr 2004, 23). One half of those donations were made online (Graf and Darr 2004, 22), and 57% of OPCs were on the email list of a politician or party representative (Graf and Darr 2004, 27). Forwarding email, one of the actions coveted by any campaign organization, "is the single greatest predictor of whether someone is an Influential, and it suggests a means by which their influence spreads" (Graf and Darr 2004, 25). Indeed, OPCs "involved in online presidential campaigns are disproportionately likely to exert a 'multiplier effect' outward into the general public" (Graf and Darr 2004, 15), making them a key demographic for campaigns to woo – and making the Internet one of the most fertile places for campaigns to spread their message to many people.

The most interesting aspect of Graf's and Darr's study is the apparent role the Internet has in transforming previous non-Influentials into Influentials. Forty-four percent of OPCs were newcomers to the political process when they were interviewed (Graf and Darr 2004, 5). Furthermore, there is a difference between the types of political activities

Influentials from the general public engage in, compared to Influentials within the segment of Online Political Citizens:

Influentials in the general public are more likely to have engaged in activities that require roots in a community, such as serving on committees, as officers of local organizations, or by attending local public meetings. Moreover, Influentials in the general public are significantly more likely to have made a speech or written an article for a magazine or newspaper – activities that imply authority and professional standing.

... [T]he political activities of [OPC Influentials] tend toward activities that are part of the current presidential campaign and require less time commitment and fewer personal resources. [OPC Influentials] seem less likely to engage in activities associated with local involvement. [OPC Influentials] also seem more inclined to “political” than “civic” involvement. (Graf and Darr 2004, 17)

OPC Influentials seem to act in different ways than Influentials in the general population. Does this mean they are a new group of Influentials? It seems to me that if OPC Influentials were merely Influentials that started using the Internet, they would display the same commitment to rooted, long-term civic engagement that non-online Influentials display. That commitment is what defined their Influential nature before the Internet was widely available, and should have carried over to their post-Internet lifestyles. But according to the results of Graf's and Darr's study, that is not the case; instead, OPC Influentials are less likely to have strong bonds to their local communities than Influentials not engaging heavily in online politicking (though OPCs are always more civically involved than the general public (Graf and Darr 2004, 16)).

The preferred avenues of political engagement for Online Political Citizens indicate that “participating in politics through the Internet facilitates spur-of-the-moment involvements that require less time and fewer personal resources. This may be attractive to younger people and political novices who have not yet acquired the experience or social standing to exert influence by holding office, serving on local committees, or

becoming officers in community organizations” (Graf and Darr 2004, 15-16). It follows that, if the Internet is spawning a new group of Online Political Citizens devoting much of their time to political engagement, the members of that new group who are active and connected enough to qualify as Influentials are surely widening the pool of Influentials in the United States.

The philosophy of political campaigning in the United States is one that treats citizens essentially as commodities – potential votes to be gathered – and allows them precious little space to provide input or take initiative. The campaign organization is assembled and operates in a top-down manner. Especially in the latter half of the twentieth century, professional political consultants have dominated campaigns and demand for specialized expertise is acute enough that campaign staffs often resemble armies of mercenaries brought in to wage war against the opposing candidates. Not surprisingly, in such an environment the role of the non-elite political citizen – which is to say, most Americans – has been greatly diminished.

The great potential of the Internet to redistribute the balance of power lies in the stupid network: a network of committed individuals who are trusted to take the initiative and organize themselves, without direct supervision or coordination from the centralized campaign apparatus. The innovation of the Dean presidential campaign helped to showcase the success of such an approach and it has evolved in the four years since. Today, average and engaged citizens across the country are not only being trusted, they are being encouraged to take this control into their own hands. The results, on a case-by-

case basis, are still nebulous and the future is uncertain, but within less than one decade there has already been a dramatic change in the relationship between campaigns and the voters who ultimately make or break them.

Joseph Graf's and Carol Darr's research (among others') offers one of the most intriguing glimpses into the promise of the Internet: new people, many previously marginalized, are being drawn into the political process through the Internet, and many of them are building social networks and exerting influence over their friends and colleagues. In recent cases, currently best embodied by Barack Obama's presidential campaign, campaigns which effectively facilitated the creation, strengthening and exploitation of these new networks of non-elites have translated them into successful mobilizations that rival traditional, elite-based sources. By diffusing control away from the center, empowering the marginalized and encouraging bottom-up engagement, the Internet has become a powerful political medium by challenging, instead of emulating, the conventions that preceded it.

### **Hybridizing Philosophies for Internet-Savvy Interest Groups**

Interest groups, like political campaigns, began their utilization of the Internet after its success in political coordination had been demonstrated. During the 1990s, popular movements such as the coalition of anti-WTO groups that filled the streets of Seattle were among the pioneers using the Internet to communicate and organize national efforts (Chadwick 2007, 287). Andrew Chadwick emphasizes the differences between these movements and the traditional interest group. Social movements are built around mass mobilization and participatory decision-making, and do not rely on hierarchical

organization or “mainstream channels” of operation (either by choice or by exclusion).

Interest groups, on the other hand, are typically organized in hierarchical fashion, focus their efforts on “policy elites” and do not rely heavily on mass mobilization as a source of power or capital (Chadwick 2007, 285).

But within the last decade, many interest groups have begun to restructure themselves based on the online networks that proved so effective for social movements (Chadwick 2007, 286). The result of these transformations has been a blending of “repertoires” (Chadwick 2007, 285) – tactics and systems of operations – within traditionally non-innovative organizations, which Chadwick terms “organizational hybridity” (Chadwick 2007, 286). The Internet-based technologies that have fueled this shift in philosophy allow many old expectations – such as establishing a central, permanent office – to be discarded and “poorly funded groups to behave as if they have greater resources than they in fact possess” (Chadwick 2007, 291). The traditional approach to lobbying is still healthy in Washington, D.C. and elsewhere, but the Internet has surprised legislators and other influential figures (Cochran 2003, 2424) with its quick ascent to being a required tool for interest groups (Fulton 2003). Online innovations have challenged existing hierarchies of control and dispersed power among many more non-elites than before.

The case studies of two interest groups, Environmental Defense and MoveOn.org, provide an illuminating illustration of the many ways by which the Internet has allowed the restructuring of priorities and organizations. Environmental Defense represents the transition from traditional structure to innovation: founded in 1967 (originally the Environmental Defense Fund), it had a staff of 170, a \$24 million annual budget and

300,000 members in 1998 (Chadwick 2007, 287). Up until that point, “it specialized not in citizen mobilization but litigation and Congressional lobbying. The old Environmental Defense Fund was certainly not a social movement organization” (Chadwick 2007, 287). In 1999, however, Environmental Defense cut its staff and launched a website designed “to capitalize on the Internet’s capacity for recruitment and mobilization... effectively becoming a grassroots organization... with a new concept of membership” (Chadwick 2007, 287-288).

MoveOn.org launched in 1998 during the Monika Lewinski scandal with the goal of pressuring members of Congress to “Censure President Clinton and Move On to Pressing Issues Facing the Nation.” Within days, their online petition had attracted hundreds of thousands of signatures; today their membership has climbed above 3.2 million individuals<sup>20</sup>. MoveOn derives much of its power and effectiveness from its use of the Internet, which allows it to embrace “genuinely new organizational types... MoveOn sometimes behaves like an interest group, sometimes like a social movement, sometimes like the wing of a traditional party during an election campaign” (Chadwick 2007, 284). Its organizational hybridity acts as a bridge between the online and offline networks MoveOn has built (Chadwick 2007, 284) and requires a minimal central presence – MoveOn Political Action, the driving force behind most of its campaigns, only employs 15 people (MoveOn 2006a) – by relying on the decentralized leadership of its volunteers.

The tactics of these two groups, and other interest groups in the United States, utilize the Internet in several ways: responding to membership, targeting their members,

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<sup>20</sup> MoveOn.org Political Action, “MoveOn.org: Democracy in Action,” MoveOn.org, <http://www.moveon.org/about.html> (accessed February 19, 2008).

using email and mobilizing their members to act within their offline communities.

### *Responding to Membership*

The faster communication that the Internet enables between millions of people at once has allowed interest groups (among many other organizations) to build much more dynamic relationships between leadership and membership than were previously imaginable. Environmental Defense surveyed its members through its website on their priorities for environmental activism, and subsequently set its organizational agenda based on the feedback they received (Chadwick 2007, 288). MoveOn.org has maintained a policy of setting priorities based on the sentiments of its base throughout its existence. In 2003, MoveOn used a “virtual primary” to gauge the candidate preferences of its members, and Howard Dean's 44% helped to establish him as a serious candidate and bring in new sources of campaign money (Cochran 2003, 2424). Following President Bush's re-election in 2004, MoveOn coordinated house parties nationwide, linked to one another over the Internet, so that members could gather in their local communities and discuss the most important issues that they hoped to see the organization prioritize (Carty and Onyett 2006, 244-245).

The process was repeated in the summer of 2006, with 10,000 members attending over 500 house parties and voting “health care for all; energy independence from clean renewable sources; and democracy restored” as “the big positive changes they'd most like to make to improve America” (MoveOn 2006b, 8). In 2008, during the heated battle between Obama and Clinton for the Democratic presidential nomination, MoveOn conducted an organization-wide vote online (and polled a segment of its members) and



formally endorsed Senator Obama after 70% indicated their preference for his candidacy<sup>21</sup>. MoveOn's efforts were subsequently put behind his campaign and its members were mobilized in support of Obama whenever possible. The rise to dominance of interest groups during the twentieth century resulted in many organizations pursuing agendas that were disconnected from the priorities of the citizens they claimed to represent. Increased communication between leadership and membership, facilitated by the Internet, has helped to mitigate that problem.

### *Making Every Message Count*

Interest groups have used the unequalled ability of computers and the Internet to gather and parse data in many of the same ways that political campaigns have done: targeting and distributing their messages to segments of their base according to distinguishing characteristics (Rainie, Cornfield, and Horrigan 2005, 2). After it reinvented itself in 1999, Environmental Defense began to recruit a new set of partial, "affiliate" members who did not pay annual dues but could be mobilized around certain issues which each individual identified as important; in 2001, it culled 8,000 of these affiliate members out of the total pool of 130,000 and asked them to put pressure on the White House protesting the administration's policy proposals regarding carbon dioxide emissions (Chadwick 2007, 288). The U.S. Chamber of Commerce used Internet advertising services to target interested users during its campaign against capital gains and dividend taxes, by paying to have its ad appear when someone ran a Google search using the word "dividend." By clicking on the ad, viewers were routed to a website that

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<sup>21</sup> MoveOn.org Political Action, "MoveOn.org: MoveOn Endorsement Throws Progressive Weight Behind Barack Obama," MoveOn.org, <http://moveon.org/press/pr/obamaendorsementrelease.html> (accessed February 1, 2008).

allowed them to join the campaign and take individual action (Cochran 2006). In this way, the Internet has helped to build stronger connections between citizens and the specific interest groups that focus on causes most important to them.

### *Building Stronger Relationships Through Email*

The use of email allows interest groups to maintain regular and widespread contact with their members and also represents a tool for mobilization. MoveOn, as an interest group that exists essentially in online form only, sends out regular emails to its members<sup>22</sup> updating them on its agenda and uses email to coordinate its grassroots-style action (Carty and Onyett 2006, 243). Like political campaigns, interest groups recognize the importance of email as a way for people to exert influence on those in their networks and communities, and so “have made a special effort to encourage their supporters to email others” (Graf et al. 2006, 30). In 2003, MoveOn used email (Taylor and Tumulty 2003) to orchestrate its online protest of proposed FCC policy that would relax media ownership regulation. In a period of three days, 351,600 signatures were gathered for its Internet petition, and delivered in printed form to Senators Byron Dorgan and Trent Lott, who were leading the charge to stop the legislation. Dorgan and Lott used the signatures as a visual aid during their speeches on the Senate floor to demonstrate “that the rule change – far from an esoteric issue important only to industry insiders – [mattered] to a wide swath of the American public.” The Senate later blocked the proposed rules (Cochran 2003, 2424).

The American Road and Transportation Builders Association (ARTBA) successfully executed a similar strategy when Congress put its attention on a repeal of the

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<sup>22</sup> I am a member of MoveOn and receive emails every week.

gas tax in response to rising gas prices. Using email, ARTBA members “pummeled” their elected representatives defending the gas tax; “Congress quietly dropped the idea of ending the tax, and ARTBA claimed victory” (Fulton 2003). Within two months, Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids mobilized 100,000 members to send messages advocating tobacco control to their representatives (Fulton 2003). Email has allowed interest groups to respond to current events much faster than before, and though online petitions and email campaigns “are proving to be far less effective than previously hoped” (Leeder 2007), they have nonetheless dramatically transformed the connections individual voters have with their elected officials and have become a central tool in much more diverse campaigns of Internet-coordinated offline activism. As seen in political campaigns, email is quickly becoming an online tool that is much more effective when used in a bottom-up manner: individuals building and strengthening their own social networks through activities such as email forwarding.

### *Bolstering Grassroots Mobilization*

The inevitable consequence of leveling the playing field of political communication is that “it has done so for everyone and [the Internet] favors only those who can pay to get their message out more loudly and boldly than others” (Leeder 2007). This has meant that interest groups have had to find ways to move beyond the over-used email campaigns and turn virtual membership into reality-based action. The innovation of MoveOn.org in accomplishing just that has helped to distinguish it from many other organizations racing to catch up. During the 2004 presidential election, MoveOn leadership sent emails to its members aimed at provoking actions in their local

communities, including the distribution of flyers and postcards to voters in their area and the hosting of house parties to support candidates speaking out against the Iraq War (Carty and Onyett 2006, 243). After a debate between the two vice presidential candidates, Senator John Edwards and Vice President Dick Cheney, MoveOn compiled a list of “false statements” made by Cheney and provided members with “a letter-to-the editor model toolkit that allowed activists to find their local newspaper and submit a letter online” (Carty and Onyett 2006, 244). These initiatives helped to expand MoveOn.org beyond actions limited to online campaigns and allow their members to take action on a local level – an approach that would be central to MoveOn's efforts in the next election and crucial to the Democratic victories that followed.

On January 18, 2005, two members of MoveOn proposed via email that the organization put its focus on winning back the House of Representatives in the approaching 2006 midterms. MoveOn members responded positively to the idea, and so the leadership began planning their strategy, declaring in a message to its members, “With thousands of teams around the country, we'll run a massive, grassroots, neighbor-to-neighbor drive to mobilize opposition to the Republican leadership's conservative policies and promote progressive candidates” (MoveOn 2006b, 4)<sup>23</sup>. The backbone of MoveOn's tactics was a decentralized approach to mobilizing its members into local and national actions that would put pressure on Republican candidates, attract attention from the media at all levels, and drive up voter turnout. Coordinating everything through the Internet, thousands of neighborhood groups and city “Coordinating Councils” were established in 200 cities and almost 100 Congressional districts (MoveOn 2006b, 6).

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<sup>23</sup> The information cited in the following section is culled from MoveOn's 2006 report, “Election 2006: People Powered Politics,” detailing their successes in the midterm elections efforts.

Over the course of the next 18 months, the organizing committees orchestrated 5,700 “actions” in their districts: over 3,000 peace vigils, 1,300 house parties, 300 press conferences, and more than 40 delegations that followed their district representatives to their events and confronted them about their “allegiance to special interests” (MoveOn 2006b, 6-9). Members across the country also wrote letters to the editors of their newspapers and appeared on local talk radio programs; all in all, the actions of “Operation Democracy” led to more than 2,000 articles being written by local media (MoveOn 2006b, 10).

MoveOn also made its presence known through more traditional approaches. In 2006, it raised \$1.5 million from members specifically to launch a television ad campaign in four Congressional districts – IN-2, VA-2, CT-5 and OH-15 – that were seen as “second-tier” races but that MoveOn hoped to make into competitive “first-tier” races that Democratic candidates could potentially steal from Republican incumbents (MoveOn 2006b, 8). After the ads were aired extensively in those areas, “polling showed that our ads drove up the negative ratings for each incumbent by 5 to 10 percentage points. ... By mid-September, all four of our Republican targets were listed as toss-ups for re-election” (MoveOn 2006b, 9). MoveOn's overall fundraising efforts were also impressive for a relatively new organization: over \$27 million raised from 608,727 individual contributions, with an average donation size of \$45. That sum represented “one of the leading sources of financial support for Democratic candidates outside of the Democratic Party's committees” (MoveOn 2006b, 11), and reinforced the close relationship between the Internet and small political contributions in the last decade. Non-elite Americans are beginning to witness the same kinds of gains in political influence– and interest groups

are deriving the same benefits – as those from similar engagement in candidate campaigning.

The truly innovative aspect of MoveOn's 18-month campaign was “Call for Change,” a national phone-banking program that married the communication and data-crunching capabilities of the Internet with the decentralized people power of local action. Call for Change was established based on the leadership's recognition that massive voter turnout could have a critical effect on the midterms, and the fact that most of MoveOn's membership was geographically distant from the most important Congressional races of the election (MoveOn 2006b, 12). Using the Internet, individual MoveOn members or groups of callers could access call sheets (MoveOn 2006b, 13) and reach out to voters across the country, where their efforts were most needed:

The core idea is fairly simple – a web-based “liquid phone bank” allowing MoveOn members to pour calls from wherever they live into wherever they are needed. We could then turn to any district in the country that needed extra attention, and keep the calls flowing until we reached all of our target voters. ... Because the program was based online, we were able to use “smart targeting” to direct members' calls to where they would have the highest impact. So volunteers living in or near competitive districts would automatically be directed to voters in their area. Volunteers in other parts of the country would be directed to whichever districts around the country needed the most urgent attention. The “liquid” internet technology we developed... enabled us to send hundreds of thousands of turnout calls into the races where they were needed most as conditions changed. (MoveOn 2006b, 12-13)

Here the potential of the Internet to galvanize political action of any scale, at all levels of government, was made most obvious. The data underline the point: over 7 million calls made by nearly 100,000 Americans over the course of just four months, targeting 61 of the most competitive Congressional districts across the United States (MoveOn 2006b, 13). In many of the targeted districts, MoveOn volunteers combined efforts to place hundreds of thousands more calls than the ultimate margin of votes that

would determine the race outcomes (MoveOn 2006b, 2). Call for Change and the many other actions that were planned and executed by MoveOn members across the country were truly unprecedented in the ways they merged traditional activism with the promise of a new technology.

Similarly to political campaigns, pioneering interest groups such as Environmental Defense and MoveOn.org defined their successes by a willingness to challenge conventional tactics within the lobbying environment. Andrew Chadwick's differentiation of traditional interest groups and social movements, and the hybridization of techniques that the Internet has facilitated, both highlight the risk-taking that was necessary and give a clear illustration of the paradigm shift that has occurred for these organizations. Whereas traditional interest groups are defined by their hierarchical organization and elite-driven work, the evolution of online interest group mobilization has drawn from the structural decentralization and widespread participation inherent in social movements.

The result has been a redefinition of standards, for organizations in which new principles were applied, and a greater emphasis on strong connections between the interest group's leadership (political elites) and the membership base (non-elites). Especially through email, the priorities and perspectives of hybridizing interest groups have been increasingly affected by the input of members on the ground level. The case of MoveOn's 2006 midterm elections mobilization efforts in particular illustrate the benefits of such a relationship, because MoveOn leadership was able to successfully rely on the

actions of its members across the country in coordinating the execution of truly grassroots actions in thousands of communities.

For non-elite Americans, the changes in interest group dynamics only add to the shifts occurring in political discourse and engagement. Hierarchies of control are being at least partially broken down and increased influence is being put in the hands of those who have traditionally had very little.



## *Conclusion*

### Empowering Citizens and Their Communities

American democracy has been, for many generations, an example for the world and a birthright for (most of) its citizens. It has survived threats from abroad and within its borders, and its successes have often emerged out of the most pressing challenges. But democracy is never a finished product. It is rather a constant work in progress that requires the unflagging commitment and innovation of its people, and a relationship of trust and cooperation between elites and non-elites that does not exist in other forms of government. For democratic processes to function effectively, a balance must be struck between individual control and the recognition that some authority must ultimately be surrendered to others.

For many reasons, this balance has been evasive throughout the history of the United States, and especially so in the realms of political discourse and engagement. Due in large part to the restrictions of existing technology, public discussions about the common interest have more closely resembled a monologue than the dynamic exchange of varying perspectives. The formalized environment for wide-scale political discourse – the news media – has never successfully challenged the restrictions of the top-down and one-way flow of information.

These limitations to the options Americans have for conversing with one another have subsequently affected the ways we engage with one another as political individuals. In the realm of campaigning (for elected office, and issue-oriented efforts by interest groups), the authority to manage the nature of citizen involvement has been traditionally held by a centralized group of political elites. Recent developments in an increasingly

complex political environment have only served to expand this group and strengthen its control.

The effects that sustained one-way interaction and centralized power have had on American non-elites have been profound. In many aspects of our political culture, the majority of citizens have been crowded out of the process and left with a diminished role. The increased ability of experts to dominate the news media and dictate the understanding of current events has reinforced, rather than weakened, barriers to participation for audiences and readerships. An overwhelming reliance on political consultants and professional lobbyists has similarly pushed the focus of campaigning toward tactics of targeted retail and a philosophy of vote-gathering rather than the shared endeavor of two-way engagement. The attrition rate of this approach has been as predictable as it is disheartening.

The patterns of decreasingly engaged contact with political discourse have taken a dangerous toll on the American populace. Expectations about the nature of the relationship between elite and non-elite political citizens – a relationship that, in its truest form, should constantly be building and rebuilding a government responsive to the priorities of the nation – have been lowered enough that many (if not most) Americans see no benefit to getting involved. In *The Assault on Reason*, Al Gore links this malaise to the limitations of our traditional communications media:

[T]he odd one-way nature of the primary connection Americans now have to our national conversation has a profound impact on their basic attitude toward democracy itself. If you can receive but not send, what does that do to your basic feelings about the nature of your connection to American self-government? (Gore 2007, 246)

He continues by relating the work of psychologists who have developed “attachment theory” to questions about our struggling democracy. According to

attachment theory, infants who are consistently taught that their emotional signals will be ignored or mishandled develop a deep-seated sense of powerlessness that can persist throughout their adult life (Gore 2007, 247). Gore argues that the dysfunctional relationship between political elites and non-elites has yielded similar feelings of powerlessness and manipulation among most Americans – and “that the viability of democracy depends upon the openness, reliability, appropriateness, responsiveness, and two-way nature of the communication environment. ... If democracy seems to work, and if people receive a consistent, reliable, and meaningful response from others when they communicate their opinions and feelings about shared experiences, they begin to assume that self-expression in democracy matters” (Gore 2007, 248). Marginalized individuals can be re-committed to the ideals of self-governance if the cycle of negative responses to their attempts at participation is reversed. The challenge, then, is to create avenues that challenge ingrained negativity and expectations of ineffectiveness, and that make an active and affirming role in politics possible.

Many significant opportunities exist today for citizens to feel like leaders, and not followers, in the national conversation. Moreover, greater numbers of Americans are taking advantage of those opportunities to re-engage – and the most important bridge to renewed involvement is the Internet. The Internet has lowered barriers surrounding political discourse and engagement, and as a result, it has become easier and more rewarding to be a part of democratic processes. The ability to take initiative or control within a discussion or campaign is being diffused from the center, and the importance of allowing non-elites to have decision-making roles is growing. This is the stupid network functioning effectively, creating new opportunities for clever and dedicated individuals to

take the initiative and become an important part of a shared effort to make progress.

These trends are central to any goal of empowering an electorate that long ago grew disillusioned about its ability to effect change. If changes in the hierarchies of control over discourse and engagement are going to occur, there must be incentive for elites and non-elites alike to make deviations from the status quo. Under the present circumstances, elites embedded in cultures like the campaign environment are disinclined to deviate from the tactics employed by previous successful organizations, even if they cannot actually identify what worked and what didn't (Jacobson 2001, 80). Most are unlikely to try radical new strategies, or surrender portions of their power over the process, when their reputations and livelihoods are at stake.

This is precisely why organizations such as MoveOn.org or Environmental Defense, or political campaigns like Howard Dean's or Barack Obama's, must be studied and expanded upon. In each instance, leadership at the top of the chain of command realized the benefits that could be reaped by turning to new technology, and allowing the dispersal of some of its control. These campaigns exemplified the notion that trusting amateurs far removed from the formal hierarchies of elite organization, and giving them the tools to become leaders in their communities, could increase effectiveness. Continued online innovation will strengthen the appeal of the Internet for elites and non-elites alike and build a more equal balance of power.

Similarly, the myth that traditional and online news media represent two entirely incompatible styles must be dispelled. The economic implications of the blogosphere and the Internet in general are frightening for many traditional news organizations and will certainly require significant changes, but the emergence of new technology has been

largely complementary to existing institutions, while also giving new power to connected and engaged non-elites. Today neither can expect to thrive without the other, and innovative hybridizations of the two – whether initiated by elites or non-elites – must be embraced and improved. The Internet is maturing as a discursive forum, and traditional news media organizations are acting quickly to deepen their online presence. Strategies to do so in a way that challenges outdated standards of journalism (while respecting what will carry over) will benefit both the organization and those who use it as an information source and an outlet for expression.

Other important conclusions can be drawn from the experience of the last decade, and the many before it. Perhaps most importantly, we must recognize from the legacies of previous communications media that the introduction of new technology does not, by itself, alter the distribution of power. Other technologies before the Internet have been heralded in the same hyperbolic tones, and yet power only grew more centralized over time. Furthermore, as R. Karl Rethemeyer points out in “The Empires Strike Back,” “If the Internet can ‘bend’ the distribution of power and influence, it is as likely that insiders can ‘bend’ the Internet to fit the status quo” (Rethemeyer 2007, 202). If political elites are the ones paying the most attention, they are likely to work hard to capitalize on new technology, too – but the outcomes may be less democratic, rather than more so.

That’s why smart people need to populate the stupid networks. Many of the online tools to strengthen American democracy exist, and many more will inevitably be created in the coming years. What’s needed most is an expanded and diversified population of citizens to start using those tools in ways that represent their perspectives and challenge

the status quo.

For the bottom-up potential of the Internet to be realized, there should be a nationwide priority to educate and train an Internet-savvy citizenry. The more people turn to the Internet to make their voices heard and build their own networks, the more power will be moved away from the center. Increased non-elite participation would also provoke more development of bottom-up online tools for political mobilization and communication. Barriers to harnessing the Internet as a political forum must continue to be removed.

One of the most fundamental of these barriers is access. Today three-quarters of the United States go online, and nearly half have broadband in their homes, but universal access to a broadband Internet connection should be a high priority at all levels of government. In June of 2006, the Pew Internet Project, the University of Texas at Austin and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology organized a workshop to recommend policy initiatives that would improve national information regarding broadband access. Two of their recommendations were to update the definition of broadband to reflect current standards (greater than 200 kilobits per second) and to require the reporting of broadband availability by more precise nine-digit zip codes, rather than five-digit codes (Flamm et al. 2007, 2). The implementation of these policies, along with others, would greatly improve the ability of governments and private companies to understand the deployment of broadband across the United States and address the gaps.

Another barrier that could be effectively reduced is the lack of education about the usefulness of the Internet to daily life, whether political or not. It's clear that low levels of comfort or experience with online activity can discourage people from adopting the Internet or using it on a regular basis. Building familiarity with new technology should be

part of school curricula and an integral part of the learning process. Initiatives aimed at training people to use computers and the Internet would likely result in greater levels of use among several currently lagging demographics. With increased contact, these Americans would recognize the benefits of the Internet; greater political awareness and engagement would probably follow.

The fundamental goal of policies like these is empowerment. At the individual level, empowerment begins with confidence in one's ability to use new technology and benefit from it. In communities, widespread and increased feelings of empowerment will foster more meaningful cooperation between those seeking solutions to issues of shared governance. Ultimately, the successful utilization of new technology in a way that changes power dynamics and brings about substantive improvements will begin to reverse feelings of powerlessness and marginalization among non-elite Americans. This is the true potential of the Internet as a mode of empowered political discourse and engagement.

As a college student with a daily schedule much different than most working Americans, one of the great blessings of the Internet age has been the spread of podcasts. Podcasts are audio (and sometimes video) shows packaged and distributed via download from the Internet. Anyone with a computer can record and distribute a podcast, on any subject. Through iTunes, the Apple music player, I am able to subscribe to a wide variety of regularly-produced podcasts – covering topics as disparate as the news, sports, science, car repair or even the history of the blues. My favorite podcast that I subscribe to, and now a staple of any long car ride or free hour, is *On Point with Tom Ashbrook*, an NPR

show featuring lively and intelligent discussion of most current issues. Thanks to online podcast downloading, I never have to worry about missing a show. Yet by relying on podcasts rather than live radio, I miss out on the opportunity to ever join the discussion by calling in with a question or comment – something I have often wished I could do.

Looking forward, we must understand that the Internet is *not* a complete replacement for that which came before it. Instead, it should be used in ways that complement methods of political engagement and mobilization. A nation of exclusively online citizens would quickly lose the cohesiveness and real-world interaction that keeps democracy together. The best protection against cyberbalkanization is the understanding that the Internet is a tool, and not a lifestyle.

The instances where the Internet has proven most effective are those in which it was used as a bridge to increased action in local communities, such as MoveOn's coordination of 2006 midterm organization across the United States, or current presidential campaigns' use of the Internet to delegate phone banking and event planning. The emergence of the Internet into daily life has quickly redefined long-held notions of the limitations of geography and community in the United States – but this does not mean all interactions should be transplanted online. The promise of online connectivity is its ability to both strengthen local communities and the national network that links us together as a national society – fostering large-scale communication without restricting decentralized leadership.

If the American people can capitalize on this opportunity, and create a new community of smart leaders based on flexible organizations, distributed initiative and trust in the motivating power of shared goals, the gap between non-elites and elites will



narrow. The future of American politics and governance will most likely not be found only online. But it will be a brighter future if citizens can successfully use the Internet to be better informed, more connected to their fellow Americans, and a more influential force in the processes that drive our government.

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